The STREETS of ASCALON

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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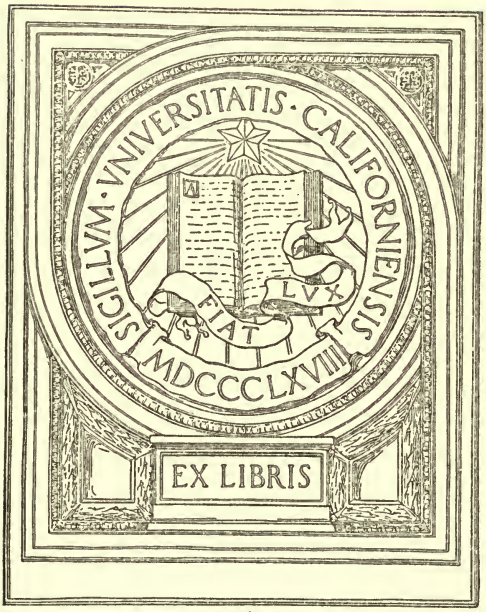

THE STREETS OF ASCALON

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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK

"She excused the witness and turned her back to the looking-glass."

The STREETS OF ASCALON

Episodes in the Unfinished Career of Richard Quarren, Esqre

BY

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

CHARLES DANA GIBSON

NEW YORK AND LONDON

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

1912

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"Tell it not in Gath, publish it not
in the streets of Ascalon."

THE STREETS OF ASCALON

CHAPTER I

It being rent day, and Saturday, the staff of the "Irish Legation," with the exception of Westguard, began to migrate uptown for the monthly conference, returning one by one from that mysterious financial jungle popularly known as "Downtown." As for Westguard, he had been in his apartment all day as usual. He worked where he resided.

A little before five o'clock John Desmond Lacy, Jr., came in, went directly to his rooms on the top floor, fished out a check-book, and tried to persuade himself that he had a pleasing balance at the bank—not because he was likely to have any balance either there or in his youthful brain, but because he *had* to have one somewhere. God being good to the Irish he found he had not overdrawn his account.

Roger O'Hara knocked on his door, later, and receiving no response called out: "Are you in there, Jack?"

"No," said Lacy, scratching away with his pen in passionate hopes of discovering a still bigger balance.

"Sportin' your oak, old Skeezicks?" inquired O'Hara, affectionately, delivering a kick at the door.

"Let me alone, you wild Irishman!" shouted Lacy. "If I can't dig out an extra hundred somewhere the State Superintendent is likely to sport my oak for keeps!"

A big, lumbering, broad-shouldered young fellow was coming up the stairs behind O'Hara, a blank book and some papers tucked under his arm, and O'Hara nodded to him and opened Mr. Lacy's door without further parleying.

"Here's Westguard, now," he said; "and as we can't shoot landlords in the close season we'll have to make arrangements to pay for bed and board, Jack."

Lacy glanced up from the sheet of figures before him, then waved his guests to seats and lighted a cigarette.

"Hooray," he remarked to Westguard; "I can draw you a check, Karl, and live to tell the tale." And he rose and gave his place at the desk to the man addressed, who seated himself heavily, as though tired.

"Before we go over the accounts," he began, "I want to say a word or two——"

"Hadn't you better wait till Quarren comes in?" interrupted O'Hara, smoking and stretching out his long legs.

"No; I want to talk to you two fellows first. And I'll tell you at once what's the matter: Quarren's check came back marked 'no funds.' This is the third time; and one of us ought to talk to him."

"It's only a slip," said Lacy—"it's the tendency in him that considers the lilies of the field——"

"It isn't square," said Westguard doggedly.

"Nonsense, Karl, Rix means to be square——"

"That's all right, too, but he isn't succeeding. It humiliates me; it hurts like hell to have to call his attention to such oversights."

"Oh, he's the gay tra-la-la," said O'Hara, indulgently; "do you think he bothers his elegant noddle about such trifles as checks? Besides he's almost as Irish as I am—God bless his mother and damn all landlords, Lester Caldera included."

"What does Quarren do with all his money, then?" mused Lacy—"soaking the public in Tappan-Zee Park and sitting up so close and snug to the rich and great!"

"It's his business," said Westguard, "to see that any check he draws is properly covered. Overdrafts may be funny in a woman, and in novels, but once is too often for any man. And this makes three times for Rix."

"Ah, thin, lave the poor la-ad be! ye could-blooded Sassenach!" said Lacy, pretending to the brogue. "Phwat the divil!—'tis the cashier ye should blame whin Rix tells him to pay, an' he refuses to projuice the long-green wad!"

But Westguard, unsmiling, consulted his memoranda, then, holding up his sheet of figures:

"There's a quorum here," he said. "Rix can read this over when he comes in, if he likes. Here's the situation." And he read off the items of liabilities and assets, showing exactly, and to a penny, how the house had been run for the past month.

Everything was there, rent, servants' wages, repairs, provisions, bills for heating and lighting, extras, incidentals — all disbursements and receipts; then, pausing for comments, and hearing none, he closed the ledger with a sharp slap.

"The roof's leakin'," observed O'Hara without particular interest.

"Write to the landlord," said Lacy—"the stingy millionaire."

"He won't fix it," returned the other. "Did you ever hear of Lester Caldera spendin' a cent?"

"On himself, yes."

"That's not spendin'; it all goes inside or outside of him somewhere." He stretched his legs, crossed them, sucked on his empty pipe, and looked around at Westguard, who was still fussing over the figures.

"Are you goin' to the Wycherlys', Karl?"

"I think so."

"What costume?"

"None of your business," retorted Westguard pleasantly.

"I'm going as the family Banshee," observed Lacy. "Did you ever hear me screech, Karl?" And, pointing his nose skyward and ruffling up his auburn hair he emitted a yell so unendurable that it brought Westguard to his feet, protesting.

"Shut up!" he said. "Do you want to have this house pinched, you crazy Milesian?"

"Get out of my rooms if you don't like it," said Lacy. "If I'm going to a masked dance as a Banshee I've got to practice screaming, haven't I?"

"I," said O'Hara, "am goin' as a bingle."

"What's a bingle?"

"Nobody knows. Neither do I; and it's killin' me to think up a costume. . . . Dick Quarren's goin', isn't he?"

"Does he ever miss anything?" said Lacy.

"He's missing most of his life," said Westguard so sharply that the others opened their eyes.

A flush had settled under Westguard's cheek-bones;

he was still jotting down figures with a flat silver pencil, but presently he looked up.

"It's the cold and uncomplimentary truth about Ricky," he said. "That set he runs with is making an utter fool of him."

"That set," repeated Lacy, grinning. "Why, we all have wealthy relatives in it—wealthy, charming, and respectable—h'm!"

"Which is why we're at liberty to curse it out," observed O'Hara, complacently. "We all know what it is. Karl is right. If a man is goin' to make anythin' of himself he can't run with that expensive pack. One may venture to visit the kennels now and then, and look over the new litters—perhaps do a little huntin' once in a while—just enough—so that the M. F. H. recognises your coat tails when you come a cropper. But nix for wire or water! Me for the gate, please. Ah, do you think a *man* can stand what the papers call 'the realm of society' very long?"

"Rix is doing well."

Westguard said: "They've gradually been getting a strangle-hold on him. Women are crazy about that sort of man—with his good looks and good humour and his infernally easy way of obliging a hundred people at once. . . . Look back a few years! Before he joined that whipper-snapper junior club he was full of decent ambition, full of go, unspoiled, fresh from college and as promising a youngster as anybody ever met. Where is his ambition now? What future has he?—except possibly to marry a million at forty-five and settle down with a comfortable grunt in the trough. It's coming, I tell you. Look what he was four years ago—a boy with clear eyes and a clear skin, frank, clean set,

clean minded. Look at him now—sallow, wiry, unprofitably wise, rangé, disillusioned—oh, hell! they've mauled him to a shadow of a rag!"

Lacy lighted another cigarette and winked at O'Hara. "Karl's off again," he said. "Now we're going to get the Bible and the Sword for fair!"

"Doesn't everybody need them both!" said Westguard, smiling. Then his heavy features altered: "I care a good deal for Dick Quarren," he said. "That's why his loose and careless financial methods make me mad—that's why this loose and careless transformation of a decent, sincere, innocent boy into an experienced, easy-going, cynical man makes me tired. I've got to stand for it, I suppose, but I don't want to. He's a gifted, clever, lovable fellow, but he hasn't any money and any right to leisure, and these people are turning him into one of those dancing things that leads cotillions and arranges tableaux, and plays social diplomat and forgets secrets and has his pockets full of boudoir keys—good Lord! I hate to say it, but they're making a tame cat of him—they're using him ignobly, I tell you —and that's the truth—if he had a friend with courage enough to tell him! I've tried, but I can't talk this way to him."

There was a silence: then O'Hara crossed one lank leg over the other, gingerly, and contemplated his left shoe.

"Karl," he said, "character never really changes; it only develops. What's born in the cradle is lowered into the grave, as some Russian guy said. You're a writer, and you know what I say is true."

"Granted. But Quarren's character isn't developing; it's being stifled, strangled. He could have been

a professional man—a lawyer, and a brilliant one—or an engineer, or a physician—any old thing. He's in real estate—if you can call it that. All right; why doesn't he *do* something in it? I'll tell you why," he added, angrily answering his own question; "these silly women are turning Quarren's ambition into laziness, his ideals into mockery, his convictions into cynicism———"

He stopped short. The door opened, and Quarren sauntered in.

"Couldn't help hearing part of your sermon, Karl," he said laughing. "Go ahead; I don't mind the Bible and the Sword—it's good for Jack Lacy, too—and that scoundrel O'Hara. Hit us again, old Ironsides. We're no good." And he sat down on the edge of Lacy's bed, and presently stretched out on it, gracefully, arms under his blond head.

"You've been catchin' it, Ricky," said O'Hara with a grin. "Karl says that fashionable society is a bally wampire a-gorgin' of hisself at the expense of bright young men like you. What's the come-back to that, sonny?"

"Thanks old fellow," said Quarren laughing and slightly lifting his head to look across at Westguard. "Go ahead and talk hell and brimstone. A fight is the only free luxury in the Irish Legation. I'll swat you with a pillow when I get mad enough."

Westguard bent his heavy head and looked down at the yellow check on the table.

"Rix," he said, "I've got to tell you that you have forgotten to make a deposit at your bank."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Quarren with weary but amiable vexation — "that is the third time. What

are you fellows going to do? Put me out of the Legation?"

"Why the devil are you so careless?" growled Westguard.

"I honestly don't know. I didn't suppose I was so short. I thought I had a balance."

"Rot! The minute a man begins to *think* he has a balance he knows damn well that he hasn't! I don't care, Rix—but, take it from me, you'll have a mortifying experience one of these days."

"I guess that's right," said Quarren with a kind of careless contrition. "I never seem to be more than a lap or two ahead of old lady Ruin. And I break the speed-laws, too."

"No youngster ever beat that old woman in a foot-race," observed Lacy. "Pay up and give her enough car-fare to travel the other way; that's your only chance, Ricky."

"Oh, certainly. No fellow need be in debt if he pays up, you Hibernian idiot!"

"Do you want some money?" asked Westguard bluntly.

"Sure, Karl, oodles of it! But not from you, old chap."

"You know you can have it from me, too, don't you?" said O'Hara.

Quarren nodded cordially: "I'll get it; no fear. I'm terribly sorry about that check. But it will be all right to-morrow, Karl."

Lacy thought to himself with a grin: "He'll kill somebody at Auction to square himself—that's what Ricky means to do. God be good to the wealthy this winter night!"

O'Hara, lank, carefully scrubbed, carefully turned out as one of his own hunters, stood up with a yawn and glanced at his watch.

"Didn't somebody say somebody was comin' in to tea?" he asked generally.

"My cousin, Mrs. Wycherly," said Westguard—"and a friend of hers—I've forgotten——"

"Mrs. Leeds," observed Lacy. "And she is reputed to be a radiant peach. Did any of you fellows ever meet her in the old days?"

Nobody there had ever seen her.

"Did Mrs. Wycherly say she is a looker?" asked O'Hara, sceptically.

Westguard shrugged: "You know what to expect when one woman tells you that another woman is good-looking. Probably she has a face that would kill a caterpillar."

Quarren laughed lazily from the bed:

"I hear she's pretty. She's come out of the West. You know, of course, who she was."

"Reggie Leeds's wife," said O'Hara, slowly.

There was a silence. Perhaps the men were thinking of the late Reginald Leeds, and of the deep damnation of his taking off.

"Have you never seen her?" asked Lacy.

"Nobody ever has. She's never before been here," said Quarren, yawning.

"Then come down and set the kettle on, Ricky. She may be the peachiest kind of a peach in a special crate directed to your address and marked 'Perishable! Rush! With care!' So we'll have to be very careful in rushing her——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake stop that lady-patter,"

protested O'Hara, linking his arm in Lacy's and sauntering toward the door. "That sort of conversation is Ricky's line of tea-talk. You'll reduce him to a pitiable silence if you take away his only asset."

Westguard gathered up his papers, pausing a moment at the doorway:

"Coming?" he asked briefly of Quarren who was laughing.

"Certainly he's coming," said Lacy returning and attempting to drag him from the bed. "Come on, you tea-cup-rattling, macaroon-crunching, caste-smitten, fashion-bitten Arbiter Elegantiarum!"

They fought for a moment, then Lacy staggered back under repeated wallops from one of his own pillows, and presently retired to his bath-room to brush his thick red hair. This hair was his pride and sorrow: it defied him in a brilliant cowlick until plastered flat with water. However, well soaked, his hair darkened to what he considered a chestnut colour. And that made him very proud.

When he had soaked and subdued his ruddy locks he came out to where Westguard still stood.

"Are you coming, Rix?" demanded the latter again.

"Not unless you particularly want me," returned Quarren, yawning amiably. "I could take a nap if that red-headed Mick would get out of here."

Westguard said: "Suit yourself," and followed Lacy and O'Hara down the stairs.

The two latter young fellows turned aside into O'Hara's apartments to further remake a killing and deadly toilet. Westguard continued on to the first

floor which he inhabited, and where he found a Japanese servant already preparing the tea paraphernalia. A few minutes later Mrs. Wycherly arrived with Mrs. Leeds.

All women, experienced or otherwise, never quite lose their curiosity concerning a bachelor's quarters. The haunts of men interest woman, fascinating the married as well as the unwedded. Deep in their gentle souls they know that the most luxurious masculine abode could easily be made twice as comfortable by the kindly advice of any woman. Toleration, curiosity, sympathy are the emotions which stir feminine hearts when inspecting the solitary lair of the human male.

"So these are the new rooms," said Molly Wycherly, patronisingly, after O'Hara and Lacy had appeared and everybody had been presented to everybody else. "Strelsa, do look at those early Edwards prints! It's utterly impossible to find any of them now for sale anywhere."

Strelsa Leeds looked up at the Botticelli Madonna and at Madame Royale; and the three men looked at her as though hynotised.

So this was Reginald Leeds's wife—this distractingly pretty woman—even yet scarcely more than a girl—with her delicate colour and vivid lips and unspoiled eyes—dark eyes—a kind of purplish gray, very purely and exquisitely shaped. But in their grayish-violet depths there was murder. And the assassination of Lacy and O'Hara had already been accomplished.

Her hat, gown, gloves, furs were black—as though the tragic shadow of two years ago still fell across her slender body.

She looked around at the room; Molly Wycherly,

pouring tea, nodded to Westguard, and he handed the cup to Mrs. Leeds.

She said, smilingly: "And—do you three unprotected men live in this big house all by yourselves?"

"There are four of us in the Legation," said Lacy, "and several servants to beat off the suffragettes who become enamoured of us."

"The—*legation?*" she repeated, amused at the term.

"Our friends call this house the Irish Legation," he explained. "We're all Irish by descent except Westguard who's a Sassenach—and Dick Quarren, who is only half Irish.'

"And who is Dick Quarren?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, Strelsa!" cautioned Molly Wycherly—"you really mustn't argue yourself unknown."

"But I am unknown," insisted the girl, laughing and looking at the men in turn with an engaging candour that bowled them over again, one by one. "I *don't* know who Mr. Quarren is, so why not admit it? *Is* he such a very wonderful personage, Mr. Lacy?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Leeds. He and I share the top floor of the Legation. We are, as a matter of record, the two financial wrecks of this establishment, so naturally we go to the garret. Poverty is my only distinction; Mr. Quarren, however, also leads the grand march at Lyric Hall now and then I believe——"

"What is Lyric Hall? Ought I to know?"

Everybody was laughing, and Molly Wycherly said:

"Richard Quarren, known variously as Rix, Ricky, and Dick Quarren, is an exceedingly popular and indis-

pensable young man in this town. You'll meet him, Strelsa, and probably adore him. We all do."

"Must I wait very long?" asked Strelsa, laughing. "I'd like to have the adoration begin."

Lacy said to O'Hara: "Go up and pull that pitiable dub off the bed, Roger. The lady wishes to inspect him."

"That's not very civil of Rix," said Mrs. Wycherly; "but I fancy I know why he requires slumber." She added, glancing around mischievously at the three men who were all looking languishingly at Mrs. Leeds: "He'll be sorry when you three gentlemen describe Strelsa to him. I can prophesy that much."

"Certainly," said Lacy, airily; "we're all at Mrs. Leeds's feet! Even the blind bat of Drumgool could see that! So why deny it?"

"You're not denying it, Mr. Lacy," said Strelsa, laughing. "But I realise perfectly that I am in the Irish Legation. So I shall carefully salt everything you say to me."

"If you think *I've* kissed the blessed pebble you ought to listen to that other bankrupt upstairs," said Lacy.

"As far as pretty speeches are concerned you seem to be perfectly solvent," said Strelsa gaily, looking around her at the various adornments of this masculine abode. "I wonder where you dine," she added with curiosity unabashed.

"We've a fine dining-room below," he said proudly, "haven't we, Roger? And as soon as Dick Quarren and I are sufficiently solvent to warrant it, the Legation is going to give a series of brilliant banquets; will you come, Mrs. Leeds?"

"When you are solvent, perhaps," said Strelsa, smiling.

"Westguard and I will give you a banquet at an hour's notice," said O'Hara, eagerly. "Will you accept?"

"Such overwhelming offers of hospitality!" she protested. "I had believed the contrary about New Yorkers. You see I've just emerged from the West, and I don't really know what to think of such bewildering cordiality."

"Karl," said Mrs. Wycherly, "are you going to show us over the house? If you are we must hurry, as Strelsa and I are to decorate the Calderas' box this evening, and it takes me an hour to paint my face." She turned a fresh, winsome countenance to Westguard, who laughed, rose, and took his pretty cousin by the hand.

Under triple escort Mrs. Wycherly and Mrs. Leeds examined the Legation from kitchen to garret—and Strelsa, inadvertently glancing in at a room just as Westguard started to close the door, caught sight of a recumbent shape on a bed—just a glimpse of a blond, symmetrical head and a well-coupled figure, graceful even in the careless relaxation of sleep.

Westguard asked her pardon: "That's Quarren. He was probably up till daylight."

"He was," said Molly Wycherly; "and by the same token so was I. Thank you so much, Karl. . . . Thank you, Mr. O'Hara—and you, too, Jack!"—offering her hand—"We've had a splendid party. . . . Strelsa, we really ought to go at once——"

"Will you come again?"

"We will come again if you ask us," said Strelsa; "we're perfectly fascinated by the Legation."

"And its personnel?" hinted Lacy. "Do you like us, Mrs. Leeds?"

"I've only seen three of you," parried Strelsa, much amused.

"We refuse to commit ourselves," said Molly. "Good-bye. I suppose you all are coming to my house-warming."

They all looked at Mrs. Leeds and said that they were coming—said so fervently.

Molly laughed: she had no envy in her make-up, perhaps because she was too pretty herself.

"Oh, yes," she said, replying to their unasked questions, "Mrs. Leeds will be there—and I plainly see *my* miserable fate. But what can a wretched woman expect from the Irish? Not constancy. Strelsa, take warning. They loved me once!"

After Westguard had put them in their limousine, he came back to find Quarren in his sitting-room, wearing a dressing-gown, and Lacy madly detailing to him the charms of Strelsa Leeds:

"Take it from me, Dicky, she's some queen! You didn't miss a thing but the prettiest woman in town! And there's a *something* about her—a kind of a sort of a something——"

"You appear to be in love, dear friend," observed Quarren kindly.

"I am. So's every man here who met her. We don't deny it! We glory in our fall! What was that costume of hers, Karl? Mourning?"

"Fancy a glorious creature like her wearin' black

for that nasty little cad," observed O'Hara disgustedly.

"It's probably fashion, not grief," remarked Westguard.

"I guess it's nix for the weeps," said O'Hara—"after all she probably went through with Reggie Leeds, I fancy she had no tears left over."

"I want to talk," cried Lacy; "I want to tell Rix what he missed. I'd got as far as her gown, I think——"

"Go on," smiled Quarren.

"Anyway," said Lacy, "she wore a sort of mourning as far as her veil went, and her furs and gown and gloves were black, and her purse was gun-metal and black opals—rather brisk? Yes?—And all the dingles on her were gun-metal—everything black and sober—and that ruddy gold head—and—those eyes!—a kind of a purple-gray, Ricky, slanting a little, with long black lashes—I noticed 'em—and her lips were very vivid—not paint, but a kind of noticeably healthy scarlet—and that straight nose—and the fresh fragrant youth of her——"

"For Heaven's sake, Jack——"

"Sure. I'm through with 'em all. I'm wise to the sex. That was merely a word picture. I'm talking like a writer, that's all. That's how you boobs talk, isn't it, Karl?"

"Always," said Westguard gravely.

"Me for Mrs. Leeds," remarked O'Hara frankly. "I'd ask her to marry me on the drop of a hat."

"Well, I'll drop no hat for *you!*" said Lacy. "And there'll be plenty of lunatics in this town who'll go madder than you or me before they forget Mrs. Leeds.

Wait! Town is going to sit up and take notice when this new planet swims into its social ken. How's that epigram, Karl?"

Westguard said thoughtfully: "There'll be notoriety, too, I'm afraid. If nobody knows her everybody knows about that wretched boy she married."

Quarren added: "I have always understood that the girl did not want to marry him. It was her mother's doings."

O'Hara scowled. "I also have heard that the mother engineered it. . . . What was Mrs. Leeds's name? I forget——"

"Strelsa Lanark," said Quarren who never forgot anything.

"Ugh," grunted Westguard. "Fancy a mother throwing her daughter at the head of a boy like Reggie Leeds!—as vicious and unclean a little whelp as ever—Oh, what's the use?—and *de mortius nihil*—et cetera, cock-a-doodle-do!"

"That poor girl had two entire years of him," observed Lacy. "She doesn't look more than twenty now—and he's been in—been dead two years. Good Heavens! What a child she must have been when she married him!"

Westguard nodded: "She had two years of him—and I suppose he seldom drew a perfectly sober breath. . . . He dragged her all over the world with him—she standing for his rotten behaviour, trying to play the game with the cards hopelessly stacked against her. Vincent Wier met them in Naples; Mallison ran across them in Egypt; so did Lydon in Vienna. They said it was heartbreaking to see her trying to keep up appear-

ances—trying to smile under his nagging or his drunken insults in public places. Lydon told me that she behaved like a brick—stuck to Reggie, tried to shield him, excuse him, make something out of the miserable pup who was doing his best to drag her to his own level and deprave her. But I guess she was too young or too unhappy or something, because there's no depravity in the girl who was here a few minutes ago. I'll swear to that."

After a moment Lacy said: "Well, he got his at last!"

"What was comin' to him," added O'Hara, with satisfaction.

Lacy added, curiously: "*How* can a man misbehave when he has such a woman for a wife?"

"I wonder," observed Quarren, "how many solid citizens read the account in the papers and remained scared longer than six weeks?"

"Lord help the wives of men," growled Westguard. . . . "If any of you fellows are dressing for dinner you'd better be about it. . . . Wait a moment, Rix!" —as Quarren, the last to leave, was already passing the threshold.

The young fellow turned, smiling: the others went on; Westguard stood silent for a moment, then:

"You're about the only man I care for very much," he said bluntly. "If I am continually giving you the Bible and the Sword it's the best I have to give."

Quarren replied laughingly.

"Don't worry, old fellow. I take what you say all right. And I really mean to cut out a lot of fussing and begin to hustle. . . . Only, isn't it a wise thing to keep next to possible clients?"

"The people you train with don't buy lots in Tappan-Zee Park."

"But I may induce them to go into more fashionable enterprises——"

"Not they! The eagle yells on every dollar they finger. If there's any bleeding to be done they'll do it, my son."

"Lester Caldera has already asked me about acreage in Westchester."

"Did he do more than ask?"

"No."

"Did you charge him for the consultation?"

"Of course not."

"Then he got your professional opinion for nothing."

"But he, or others, may try to assemble several farms——"

"Why don't they then?—instead of dragging you about at their heels from house to house, from card-room to ball-room, from café to opera, from one week-end to the next!—robbing you of time, of leisure, of opportunity, of ambition—spoiling you—making a bally monkey of you! You're always in some fat woman's opera box or on some fat man's yacht or coach, or doing some damn thing—with your name figuring in everything from Newport to Hot Springs—and—and how can you ever turn into anything except a tame cat!"

Quarren's face reddened slightly.

"I'd be perfectly willing to sit in an office all day and all night if anybody would give me any business. But what's the use of chewing pencils and watching traffic on Forty-second Street?"

"Then go into another business!"

"I haven't any money."

"I'll lend it to you!"

"I can't risk *your* money, Karl. I'm too uncertain of myself. If anybody else offered to stake me I'd try the gamble." . . . He looked up at Westguard, ashamed, troubled, and showing it like a boy. "I'm afraid I don't amount to anything, Karl. I'm afraid I'm no good except in the kind of thing I seem to have a talent for."

"Fetching and carrying for the fashionable and wealthy," sneered Westguard.

Quarren's face flushed again: "I suppose that's it."

Westguard glared at him: "I wish I could shake it out of you!"

"I guess the poison's there," said Quarren in a low voice. "The worst of it is I like it—except when I understand your contempt."

"You *like* to fetch and carry and go about with your pocket full of boudoir keys!"

"People give me as much as I give them."

"They don't!" said the other angrily. "They've taken a decent fellow and put him in livery!"

Quarren bit his lip as the blood leaped to his face.

"Don't talk that way, Karl," he said quietly. "Even you have no business to take that tone with me."

There was a silence. After a few moments Westguard came over and held out his hand. Quarren took it, looked at him.

"I tell you," he said, "there's nothing to me. It's your kindness, Karl, that sees in me possibilities that never were."

"They're there. I'll do my duty almost to the

point of breaking our friendship. But—I'll have to stop short of that point."

A quick smile came over Quarren's face, gay, affectionate:

"You couldn't do that, Karl. . . . And don't worry. I'll cut out a lot of frills and try to do things that are worth while. I mean it, really. Don't worry, old fellow."

"All right," said Westguard, smiling.

CHAPTER II

A MASKED dance, which for so long has been out of fashion in the world that pretends to it, was the experiment selected by Molly Wycherly for the warming up of her new house on Park Avenue.

The snowy avenue for blocks was a mass of motors and carriages; a platoon of police took charge of the vehicular mess. Outside of the storm-coated lines the penniless world of shreds and patches craned a thousand necks as the glittering costumes passed from brougham and limousine under the awnings into the great house.

Already in the new ball-room, along the edges of the whirl, masqueraders in tumultuous throngs were crowding forward to watch the dancers or drifting into the eddies and set-backs where ranks of overloaded gilt chairs creaked under jewelled dowagers, and where rickety old beaux impersonated tinselled courtiers on wavering but devoted legs.

Aloft in their rococo sky gallery a popular orchestra fiddled frenziedly; the great curtains of living green set with thousands of gardenias swayed in the air currents like Chinese tapestries; a harmonious tumult swept the big new ball-room from end to end—a composite uproar in which were mingled the rushing noise of silk, clatter of sole and heel, laughter and cries of capering maskers gathered from the four quarters of fashionable

Gath to grace the opening of the House of Wycherly. They were all there, dowager, matron, débutante, old beaux, young gallant, dancing, laughing, coquetting, flirting. Young eyes mocked the masked eyes that wooed them; adolescence tormented maturity; the toothless ogled the toothsome. Unmasking alone could set right this topsy-turvy world of carnival.

A sinuous Harlequin, his skin-tight lozenge-patterned dress shimmering like the red and gold skin of a Malay snake, came weaving his way through the edges of the maelstrom, his eyes under the black half-mask glittering maliciously at the victims of his lathe-sword. With it he recklessly slapped whatever tempted him, patting gently the rounded arms and shoulders of nymph and shepherdess, using more vigour on the plump contours of fat and elderly courtiers, spinning on the points of his pump-toes, his limber lathe-sword curved in both hands above his head, leaping lithely over a chair here and there, and landing always as lightly as a cat on silent feet—a wiry, symmetrical figure under the rakish bi-corne, instinct with mischief and grace infernal.

Encountering a burly masker dressed like one of Cromwell's ponderous Ironsides, he hit him a resounding whack over his aluminum cuirass, and whispered:

"That Ironside rig doesn't conceal you: it reveals you, Karl! Out with your Bible and your Sword and preach the wrath to come!"

"It will come all right," said Westguard. "Do you know how many hundred thousand dollars are wasted here to-night? . . . And yesterday a woman died of hunger in Carmine Street. Don't worry about

the wrath of God as long as people die of cold and hunger in the streets of Ascalon."

"That's not as bad as dying of inanition—which would happen to the majority here if they didn't have things like this to amuse 'em. For decency's sake, Karl, pity the perplexities of the rich for a change!"

Westguard grunted something under his casque; then, adjusting his aluminum mask:

"Are you having a good time, Dicky? I suppose you are."

"Oh, *I'm* gay enough," returned the Harlequin airily—"but there's never much genuine gaiety among the overfed." And he slapped a passing gallant with his wooden sword, spun around on his toes, bent over gracefully and stood on his hands, legs twinkling above him in the air. Then, with a bound he was on his nimble feet again, and, linking his arm in the arm of the Cromwellian trooper, strolled along the ranks of fanning dowagers, glancing amiably into their masked faces.

"Same old battle-line," he observed to his companion—"their jewels give them away. Same old tiaras, same old ladies—all fat, all fifty, all fanning away like the damned. Your aunt has on about a ton of emeralds. I think she does it for the purpose of banting, don't you, Karl——"

The uproar drowned his voice: Westguard, colossal in his armour, gazed gloomily around at the gorgeous spectacle for which his cousin Molly Wycherly was responsible.

"It's monkey-shines like this that breed anarchists," he growled. "Did you notice that rubbering

"Westguard, colossal in his armour, gazed gloomily around at the gorgeous spectacle."

crowd outside the police lines in the snow? Molly and Jim ought to see it."

"Oh, cut it out, Karl," retorted the Harlequin gaily; "there'll be rich and poor in the world as long as the bally old show runs—there'll be reserved seats and gallery seats and standing room only, and ninety-nine per cent. of the world cooling its shabby heels outside."

"I don't care to discuss the problem with *you*," observed Westguard. After a moment he added: "I'm going to dance once or twice and get out. . . . I suppose you'll flit about doing the agreeable and fashionable until daylight."

"I suppose so," said the Harlequin, tranquilly. "Why not? Also *you* ought to find material here for one of your novels."

"A man doesn't have to hunt for material. It's in his bed-room when he wakes; it's all around him all day long. There's no more here than there is outside in the snow; and no less. . . . But dancing all night isn't going to help *your* business, Ricky."

"It won't hurt any business I'm likely to do."

"Isn't your Tappan-Zee Park panning out?"

"Fizzling out. Nobody's bought any building sites."

"Why not?"

"How the deuce do I know, Karl! I don't want to talk business, here——"

He ceased speaking as three or four white masked Bacchantes in fluttering raiment came dancing by to the wild music of Philemon and Baucis. Shaking their be-ribboned tambourines, flowery garlands and lynx-skins flying from their shoulders, they sped away on fleet little feet, hotly pursued by adorers.

"Come on," said the Harlequin briskly; "I think one of those skylarkers ought to prove amusing! Shall I catch you one?"

But he found no encouragement in the swift courtship he attempted; for the Bacchantes, loudly protesting at his interference, banged him over his head and shoulders with their resounding tambourines and danced away unheeding his blandishments.

"Flappers," observed a painted and powdered clown whose voice betrayed him as O'Hara; "this town is overstocked with fudge-fed broilers. They're always playin' about under foot, spoilin' your huntin'; and if you touch 'em they ki-yi no end."

"I suppose you're looking for Mrs. Leeds," said Westguard, smiling.

"I fancy every man here is doin' the same thing," replied the clown. "What's her costume? Do you know, Ironsides?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I did," said Westguard frankly.

The Harlequin shrugged.

"This world," he remarked, "is principally encumbered with women, and naturally a man supposes the choice is unlimited. But as you live to drift from girl to girl you'll discover that there are just two kinds; the kind you can kiss and the kind you can't. So finally you marry the latter. Does Mrs. Leeds flirt?"

"Will a fish swim?" rejoined the clown. "You bet she will flirt. Haven't you met her?"

"I? No," said the Harlequin carelessly. Which secretly amused both Westguard and O'Hara, for it had been whispered about that the new beauty not only had

taken no pains to meet Quarren, but had pointedly ignored an opportunity when the choice lay with her, remarking that dancing men were one of the social necessities which everybody took for granted—like flowers and champagne. And the comment had been carried straight to Quarren, who had laughed at the time—and had never forgotten it, nor the apparently causeless contempt that evidently had inspired it.

The clown brandished his bunch of toy balloons, and gazed about him:

"Anybody who likes can go and tell Mrs. Leeds that I'm her declared suitor. I don't care who knows it. I'm foolish about her. She's different from any woman I ever saw. And if I don't find her pretty soon I'll smash every balloon over your head, Ricky!"

The Harlequin laughed. "Women," he said, "are cut out in various and amusing patterns like animal crackers, but the fundamental paste never varies, and the same pastry cook seasoned it."

"That's a sickly and degenerate sentiment," observed Westguard.

"You might say that about the unfledged," added O'Hara—"like those kittenish Bacchantes. Winifred Miller and the youngest Vernon girl were two of those Flappers, I think. But there's no real jollity among the satiated," he added despondently. "A mask, a hungry stomach, and empty pockets are the proper ingredients for gaiety—take it from me, Karl." And he wandered off, beating everybody with his bunch of toy balloons.

Quarren leaped to the seat of a chair and squatted there drawing his shimmering legs up under him like a great jewelled spider.

"Bet you ten that the voluminous domino yonder envelops my aunt, Mrs. Sprowl," whispered Westguard.

"You're betting on a certainty and a fat ankle."

"Sure. I've seen her ankles going upstairs too often. . . . What the devil is the old lady wearing under that domino?"

"Wait till you see her later," said Quarren, delightedly. "She has come as Brunhilda."

"I don't want to see three hundred pounds of relative as Brunhilda," growled Westguard.

"You will, to-morrow. She's given her photograph to a *Herald* man."

"What did you let her do it for?" demanded Westguard wrathfully.

"Could I help it?"

"You could have stopped her. She thinks your opinion is the last lisp in fashionable art problems."

"There are some things you can't tell a woman," said Quarren. "One of 'em concerns her weight."

"Are you afraid of Mrs. Sprowl?"

The Harlequin laughed:

"Where would I be if I incurred your aunt's displeasure, dear friend?"

"Out of the monkey house for good I suppose," admitted Westguard. "Lord, Ricky, what a lot you have had to swallow for the sake of staying put among these people!"

Quarren sat meditating under his mask, cross-legged, twirling his sword, the crash of the floor orchestra dinning in his close-set ears.

"Yes," he said without resentment, "I've endured my share. That's one reason why I don't want to let

several years of humiliation go for nothing. I've earned whatever place I have. And I mean to keep it."

Westguard turned on him half angrily, hesitated, then remained silent. What was the use? If Quarren had not been guilty of actually fawning, toadying, currying favour, he had certainly permitted himself to be rudely used. He had learned very thoroughly his art in the school of the courtier—learned how and when to be blind, silent, deaf; how to offer, how to yield, when and how to demand and exact. Which, to Westguard, meant the prostitution of intelligence. And he loathed the game like a man who is free to play it if he cares to. Of those who are denied participation, few really hate it.

But he said nothing more; and the Harlequin, indolently stretching his glittering limbs, dropped a light hand on Westguard's cuirassed shoulder:

"Don't be forever spoiling things for me, Karl. I really do enjoy the game as it lies."

"It *does* lie—that is the trouble, Rix."

"I can't afford to criticise it. . . . Listen; I'm a mediocre man; I'd never count among real men. I count in the set which I amuse and which accepts me. Let me enjoy it, can't you?"

An aged dandy, masked, painted, wizened, and dressed like Henri II, tottered by with a young girl on his arm, his shrill, falsetto giggle piercing the racket around them.

"Do you wish to live to be like that?" asked Westguard sharply.

"Oh, I'll die long before that," said Quarren cheerfully, and leaped lightly to his feet. "I shall now accomplish a little dancing," he said, pointing with his

wooden sword at the tossing throng. "Venus send me a pretty married woman who really loves her husband. . . . By Bacchus! Those dancers are going it! Come on, Karl. Leave us foot it!"

Many maskers were throwing confetti now: multi-tinted serpents shot out across the clamorous gulf; bunches of roses flung high, rising in swift arcs of flight, crossed and recrossed. All along the edges of the dance, like froth and autumn leaves cast up from a whirlpool, fluffy feminine derelicts and gorgeous masculine escorts were flung pell-mell out of the maelstrom and left stranded or drifting breathless among the eddies setting in toward the supper-room.

Suddenly, as the Harlequin bent forward to plunge into the crush, the very centre of the whirlpool parted, and out of it floated a fluttering, jingling, dazzling figure all gold—slender, bare-armed and bare of throat and shoulders, auriferous, scintillating from crown to ankle—for her sleeveless tabard was cloth-of-gold, and her mask was gold; so were her jewelled shoes and the gemmed fillet that bound her locks; and her thick hair clustering against her cheeks had the lustre of precious metal.

Jingling, fluttering, gems clashing musically, the Byzantine dancer, besieged by adorers, deftly evaded their pressing gallantries—evaded the Harlequin, too, with laughing mockery, skilfully disengaging herself from the throng of suitors stumbling around her, crowded and buffeted on every side.

After her like a flash sped Harlequin: for an instant, just ahead of him, she appeared in plain sight, glimmering brightly against the green and swaying tapestry of living leaves and flowers, then even as her

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besieged by adorers, deftly evaded their pressing gallantries."

pursuers looked at her, she vanished before their very eyes.

They ran about distractedly hunting for her, Turk, Drum Major, Indian Chief, and Charles the First, then reluctantly gave up the quest and drifted off to seek for another ideal. All women are ideal under the piquant promise of the mask.

A pretty shepherdess, lingering near, whispered close to Quarren's shoulder behind her fan:

"Check to you, Harlequin! That golden dancer was the only girl in town who hasn't taken any pains to meet you!"

He turned his head, warily, divining Molly Wycherly under the disguise, realising, too, that she recognised him.

"You'll never find her now," laughed the shepherdess. "Besides she does not care a rap about meeting a mere Harlequin. It's refreshing to see you so thoroughly snubbed once in a while." And she danced gaily away, arms akimbo, her garlanded crook over her shoulder; and her taunting laughter floated back to him where he stood irresolute, wondering how the golden dancer could have so completely vanished.

Suddenly he recollected going over the house before its completion with Jim Wycherly, who had been his own architect, and the memory of a certain peculiarity in the construction of the ball-room flashed into his mind. The only possible explanation for her disappearance was that somebody had pointed out to her the low door behind the third pillar, and she was now in the gilded swallow's-nest aloft.

It was a whim of Wycherly—this concealed stair—he recalled it perfectly now—and, parting the living

tapestry of blossoms, he laid his hand on the ivory and gilded paneling, pressing the heart of one carved rose after another, until with a click! a tiny door swung inward, revealing a narrow spiral of stairs, lighted rosily by electricity.

He stepped inside, closed the door, and listened, then mounted noiselessly. Half way up he caught the aroma of a cigarette; and, a second later he stepped out onto a tiny latticed balcony, completely screened.

The golden dancer, who evidently had been gazing down on the carnival scene below from behind the lattice, whirled around to confront him in a little flurry of cigarette smoke.

For a moment they faced each other, then:

"How did you know where to find me, Harlequin?"

"I'd have died if I hadn't found you, fairest, loveliest——"

"That is no answer! Answer me!"

"Why did you flee?" he asked. "Answer that, first."

She glanced at her cigarette and shrugged her shoulders:

"You see why I fled, don't you? Now answer me."

The Harlequin presented the hilt of his sword which was set with a tiny mirror.

"You see why I fled after you," he said, "don't you?"

"All the same," she insisted, smilingly, "I have been informed on excellent authority that I am the only one, except the family, who knows of this balcony. And here comes a Harlequin blundering in! *You* are not Mr. Wycherly; and you're certainly not Molly."

"Alas! My ultimate ends are not as shapely."

"Then who are you?" She added, laughing: "They're shapely enough, too."

"I am only a poor wandering, love-smitten Harlequin—" he said, "scorned, despised, and mocked by beauty——"

"Love-smitten?" she repeated.

"Can you doubt it, now?"

She laughed gaily and leaned back against the balcony's velvet rail:

"You lose no time in declaring yourself, do you, Harlequin?—that is, if you are hinting that *I* have smitten you with the pretty passion."

"Through and through, beautiful dancer——"

"How do you know that I am beautiful under this mask?"

"I know many things. That's my compensation for being only a poor mountebank of a Harlequin—magic penetration—the clairvoyance of radium."

"Did you expect to find *me* at the top of those cork-screw stairs?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Inference. Every toad hides a jewel in its head. So I argued that somewhere in the ugliness of darkest Philistia a gem must be hidden; and I've searched for years—up and down throughout the haunts of men from Gath to Ascalon. And—behold! My quest is ended at your pretty feet!—Rose-Diamond of the World!"

He sank lithely on one knee; she laughed deliciously, looking down at his masked face.

"Who are you, Harlequin?—whose wits and legs seem to be equally supple and symmetrical?"

"Tell it not in Gath; Publish it not in the streets of Ascalon; I am that man for whom you were destined before either you or I were born. Are you frightened?"

The Byzantine dancer laughed and shook her head till all the golden metal on her was set chiming.

He said, still on one knee at her feet:

"Exquisite phantom of an Empire dead, from what emblazoned sarcophagus have you danced forth across our modern oceans to bewitch the Philistia of to-day? Who clothed you in scarlet delicately? Who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel——"

"You court me with Scripture as smoothly as Heaven's great Enemy," she said—"and to your own ends, as does he. Are you leagued with him, O agile and intrusive Harlequin, to steal away my peace of mind?"

Lithely, silently he leaped up to the balustrade and, gathering his ankles under him, squatted there, cross-legged, peering sideways at her through the slanting eye-holes.

"If that screen behind you gives way," she warned him, "you will have accomplished your last harlequinade."

He glanced coolly over his shoulder:

"How far is it to the floor below, do you suppose?"

"Far enough to make a good harlequin out of a live one," she said. . . . "Please be careful; I really mean it."

"Child," he said solemnly, "do you suppose that I mind falling a hundred feet or so on my head? I've already fallen infinitely farther than that this evening."

"And it didn't kill you?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands, dramatically.

"No. Because our destiny must first be accomplished before I die."

"Ours?"

"Yours and mine, pretty dancer! I've already fulfilled *my* destiny by falling in love with you at first sight. That was a long fall, wasn't it?"

"Very. Am I to fulfil mine in a similar manner?"

"You are."

"Will it—kill me, do you think?"

"I don't think so. Try it."

"Will it hurt?—this terrible fall? And how far must I descend to fall in love with you?"

"Sometimes falling in love does hurt," he said gravely, "when the fall is a long one."

"Is this to be a long one?"

"You may think so."

"Then I decline to tumble. Please go somewhere about your business, Master Harlequin. I'm inclined to like you."

"Dancer, my life's business is wherever you happen to be."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Magic," he said seriously. "I deal in it."

"Wonderful! Your accomplishments overwhelm me. Perhaps, through the aid of magic, you can even tell me who I am!"

"I think I can."

"Is that another threat of magic?"

"It's a bet, too, if you like."

"Are you offering to bet me that, before I unmask, you will be able to discover who I am?"

"Yes. Will you make it a wager?"

She stood, silent, irresolute, cautious but curious; then:

"Do you mean that you can find out who *I am*? Now? Here in this balcony?"

"Certainly."

"That is sheer nonsense," she said with decision. "I'll bet you anything you like."

"What stakes?"

"Why there's nothing to bet except the usual, is there?"

"You mean flowers, gloves, stockings, bon-bons?"

"Yes."

The Harlequin, smiling at her askance, drew from the hilt of his lathe-sword a fresh cigarette, lighted it, looked across at the level chandelier, and sent a ring of smoke toward the twinkling wilderness of prisms hanging in mid-air.

"Let's be original or perish," he said. "I'll bet you a day out of my life against a day out of yours that I discover who you are in ten minutes."

"I won't accept such a silly wager! What would you do with me for a day?"

The Harlequin bent his masked head. Over his body the lozenges of scarlet and gold slid crinkling as though with suppressed and serpentine mirth.

"*What* are you laughing at?" she demanded half vexed, half amused.

"Your fears, pretty dancer."

"I am *not* afraid!"

"Very well. Prove it! I have offered to bet you a day out of my life that I'll tell you who you are. Are you afraid to wager a day out of yours that I can't do it?"

She shook her head so that the burnished locks clustered against her cheeks, and all over her slim figure the jingling gold rang melodiously.

"I haven't long to live," she observed. "A day out of life is too much to risk."

"Why don't you think that you have long to live?"

"I haven't. I know it."

"*How* do you know?"

"I just know. . . . Besides, I don't wish to live very long."

"You don't wish to live long?"

"Only as long as I'm young enough to be forgetful. Old age is a horror—in some cases. I don't desire ever to be forty. After forty they say one lives on memory. I don't wish to."

Through the slits of his mask his curious eyes watched her steadily.

"You're not yet twenty-four," he said.

"Not quite. That is a good guess, Harlequin."

"And you don't want to live to be old?"

"No, I don't wish to."

"But you are rather keen on living while you're young."

"I've never thought much about it. If I live, it's all right; if I die, I don't think I'll mind it. . . . I'm sure I shouldn't."

Her cigarette had gone out. She tossed it aside and daintily consented to exchange cigarettes with him, offering her little gold case.

"You're carefully inspecting my initials, aren't you?" she observed, amused. "But that monogram will not help you, Master Harlequin."

"Marriage alters only the final initial. Are you, by any unhappy chance——"

"That's for you to find out! I didn't say I was! I believe you *are* making me tell you things!"

She threw back the lustrous hair that shadowed her cheeks and leaned forward, her shadowed eyes fixed intently upon him through the apertures of her golden mask.

"I'm beginning to wonder uneasily who *you* may be, Monsieur Harlequin! You alarm me a little."

"Aha!" he said. "I've told you I deal in magic! That you don't know who I am, even after that confession, makes me reasonably certain who *you* are."

"You're trying to scare me," she said, disdainfully.

"I'll do it, yet."

"I wonder."

"You'll wonder more than ever in a few moments. . . . I'm going to tell you who you are. But first of all I want you to fix the forfeit——"

"Why—I don't know. . . . What do you want of me?" she asked, mockingly.

"Whatever you care to risk."

"Then you'll have to name it. Because I don't particularly care to offer you anything. . . . And please hasten—I'll be missed presently——"

"Won't you bet one day out of your life?"

"No, I won't. I told you I wouldn't."

"Then—one hour. Just a single hour?"

"An hour?"

"Yes, sixty minutes, payable on demand: If I win, you will place at my disposal one entire hour out of your life. Will you dare that much, pretty dancer?"

She laughed, looked up at him; then readjusting

her mask, she nodded disdainfully. "Because," she observed, "it is quite impossible for you ever to guess who I am. So do your very worst."

He sprang from the balustrade, landing lightly, his left hand spread over his heart, his bi-corne flourished in the other.

"You are Strelsa Leeds!" he said in a low voice.

The golden dancer straightened up to her full height, astounded, and a bright flood of colour stained her cheeks under the mask's curved edge.

"It—it is impossible that you should know—" she began, exasperated. "How *could* you? Only one person knew what I was to wear to-night! I came by myself with my maid. It—it *is* magic! It is infernal—abominable magic——"

She checked herself, still standing very straight, the gorgeous, blossom-woven cloth-of-gold rippling; the jewels shooting light from the fillet that bound her hair.

After a silence:

"How did you know?" she asked, striving to smile through the flushed chagrin. "It is perfectly horrid of you—anyhow——"

Curiosity checked her again; she stood gazing at him in silence, striving to pierce the eye-slits of that black skin-mask—trying to interpret the expression of the mischievous mobile mouth below it—or, perhaps the malice was all in those slanting slits behind which two strange eyes sparkled steadily out at her from the shadow.

"Strelsa Leeds," he repeated, and flourished one hand in graceful emphasis as she coloured hotly again. And he saw the teeth catch at her under lip.

"It is outrageous," she declared. "Tell me instantly who you are!"

"First," he insisted, mischievously, "I claim the forfeit."

"The—the forfeit!" she faltered.

"Did you not lose your wager?"

She nodded reluctantly, searching the disguised features before her in vain for a clew to his identity. Then, a trifle uneasily:

"Yes, of course I lost my wager. But—I did not clearly understand what you meant by an hour out of my life."

"It is to be an hour at my disposal," he explained with another grotesque bow. "I think that was the wager?"

"Y-yes."

"Unless," he remarked carelessly, "you desire the —ah—privilege and indisputable prerogative of your delightful sex."

"The privilege of my sex? What is that?" she asked, dangerously polite.

"Why, to change your divine mind—repudiate the obligation——"

"Harlequin!"

"Madame?" with an elaborate and wriggling bow.

"I pay what I owe—always. . . . *Always!* Do you understand?"

The Harlequin bowed again in arabesques, very low, yet with a singular and almost devilish grace:

"Madame concedes that the poor Harlequin has won his wager?"

"Yes, I do—and you don't appear to be particularly humble, either."

"Madame insists on paying?" he inquired suavely.

"Yes, of course I do!" she said, uneasily. "I promised you an hour out of my life. Am I to pay it now?"

"You pay by the minute—one minute a day for sixty days. I am going to take the first minute now. *Perhaps* I may ask for the other fifty-nine, also."

"How?"

"Shall I show you how?"

"Very well."

"A magic pass or two, first," he said gaily, crooking one spangled knee and spinning around. Then he whipped out his lathe-sword, held it above his head, coolly passed a glittering arm around her waist, and looked down into her flushed face.

"You will have to count out the sixty seconds," he said. "I shall be otherwise occupied, and I can't trust myself to do two things at once."

"*What* are you about to do? Sink through a trapdoor with me?"

"I am about to salute you with the magic kiss. After that you'll be my Columbine forever."

"That is not included in the bet! Is it?" she asked in real consternation.

"I may do as I please with my hour, may I not?"

"Was it the bet that you were to be at liberty to—to kiss me?"

"I control absolutely an hour out of your life, do I not? I may use it as I please. You had better count out sixty seconds."

She looked down, biting her lip, and touched one hand against her cheeks, alternately, as though to cool them with the snowy contact.

He waited in silence for her reply.

"Very well," she said resolutely, "if you elect to use the first minute of your hour as frivolously as that, I must submit, I suppose."

And she began to count aloud, rapidly: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, ni——"

Her face was averted; he could see the tip of one small ear all aflame. Presently she ventured a swift glance around at him and saw that he was laughing.

"Ten, eleven, twelve," she counted nervously, still watching him; "thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—" panic threatened her; she doubled both hands in the effort of self-control and timed her counting as though the rapid beating of the tempo could hasten her immunity—"sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, one, two, three——"

"Play fair!" he exclaimed.

"I am trying to. Can't I say it that way up to ten, and then say thirty?"

"Oh, certainly. I've still half a minute. You'd better hurry! I may begin at any moment."

"Four—five—six—seven—m-m-m—thirty!" she cried, and the swift numbers fled from her lips fairly stumbling over one another, tumbling the sequence of hurrying numerals into one breathless gasp of: "Forty!"

His arm slid away from her waist; he stepped backward, and stood, watching her, one finger crooked, supporting his chin, the ironical smile hovering ever on his lips.

"Fifty!" she counted excitedly, her hands beating time to the counting; "—fifty-one—two—three—four—m-m-m—sixty!"—and she whirled around to face

him with an impulsively triumphant gesture which terminated in a swift curtsey, arms flung wide apart.

"*Voila!*" she said, breathlessly, "I've paid my bet! Am I not a good sport, Harlequin? Own that I am and I will forgive your outrageous impudence!"

"You are a most excellent sport, madame!" he conceded, grinning.

Relief from the tension cooled her cheeks; she laughed bewitchingly and looked at him, exultant, unafraid.

"I frightened you well with my desperate counting, didn't I? You completely forgot to do—anything, didn't you? Voyons! Admit it!"

"You completely terrorized me," he admitted.

"Besides," she said, "while I was so busily counting the seconds aloud you couldn't very well have kissed me, could you? *That* was strategy. You couldn't have managed it, could you?"

"Not very easily."

"I really *did* nonplus you, didn't I?" she insisted, aware of his amusement.

"Oh, entirely," he said. "I became an abject idiot."

She stood breathing more evenly now, the pretty colour coming and going in her cheeks. Considering him, looking alternately at his masked eyes and at his expressive lips where a kind of silent and infernal mirth still flickered, a sudden doubt assailed her. And presently, with a dainty shrug, she turned and glanced down through the gilt lattice toward the floor below.

"I suppose," she said, tauntingly, "you hope I'll believe that you refrained from kissing me out of some belated consideration for decency. But I know per-

fectly well that I perplexed you, and confused you and intimidated you."

"This is, of course, the true solution of my motives in not kissing you."

She turned toward him:

"What motive?"

"My motive for not kissing you. My only motive was consideration for you, and for the sacred conventions of Sainte Grundy."

"I believe," she said scornfully, "you are really trying to make me think that you *could* have done it, and didn't!"

"You are too clever to believe me a martyr to principle, madame!"

She looked at him, stamped her foot till the bangles clashed.

"Why *didn't* you kiss me, then?—if you wish to spoil my victory?"

"You yourself have told me why."

"Am I wrong? Could you—didn't I surprise you—in fact, paralyse you—with astonishment?"

He laughed delighted; and she stamped her ringing foot again.

"I see," she said; "I am supposed to be doubly in your debt, now. I'd rather you *had* kissed me and we were quits!"

"It isn't too late you know."

"It *is* too late. It's all over."

"Madame, I have fifty-nine other minutes in which to meet your kindly expressed wishes. Did you forget?"

"What!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"One hour less one minute is still coming to me."

"Am I—have I—is this ridiculous performance going to happen again?" she asked, appalled.

"Fifty-nine times," he laughed, doubling one spangled leg under the other and whirling on his toe till he resembled a kaleidoscopic teetotum. Then he drew his sword, cut right and left, slapped it back into its sheath, and bowed his wriggling bow, one hand over his heart.

"Don't look so troubled, madame," he said. "I release you from your debt. You need never pay me what you owe me."

Up went her small head, fiercely, under its flashing hair:

"Thank you. I pay my debts!" she said crisply.

"You decline to accept your release?"

"Yes, I do!—from *you!*"

"You'll see this thing through!—if it takes all winter?"

"Of course;" trying to smile, and not succeeding.

He touched her arm and pointed out across the hot, perfumed gulf to the gilded clock on high:

"You *have* seen it through! It is now one minute to midnight. We have been here exactly one hour, lacking a minute, since our bet was on. . . . And I've wanted to kiss you all the while."

Confused, she looked at the clock under its elaborate azure and ormolu foliations, then turned toward him, still uncertain of her immunity.

"Do you mean that you have really used the hour as you saw fit?" she asked. "Have I done my part honestly?—Like a good sportsman? Have I really?"

He bowed, laughingly:

"I cheerfully concede it. You are a good sport."

"And—all that time—" she began—"all that time——"

"I had my chances—sixty of them."

"And didn't take them?"

"Only wanted to—but didn't."

"You think that I——"

"A woman never forgets a man who has kissed her. I took the rather hopeless chance that you might remember me without that. But it's a long shot. I expect that you'll forget me."

"Do you *want* me to remember you?" she asked, curiously.

"Yes. But you won't."

"How do you know?"

"I know—from the expression of your mouth, perhaps. You are too pretty, too popular to remember a poor Harlequin."

"But you never have seen my face? Have you?"

"No."

"Then why do you continually say that I am pretty?"

"I can divine what you must be."

"Then—how—why did you refrain from—" She laughed lightly, and looked up at him, mockingly. "Really, Harlequin, you *are* funny. Do you realise it?"

She laughed again and the slight flush came back into her cheeks.

"But you're nice, anyway. . . . Perhaps if you *had* seen my face you might have let me go unkissed all the quicker. . . . Masks cover horrible surprises. . . . And, then again, if you *had* seen it, *perhaps* you might *never* have let me go at all!" she added, audaciously.

In the gilded balcony opposite, the orchestra had now ceased playing; the whirl and noise of the dancers filled the immense momentary quiet. Then soft chimes from the great clock sounded midnight amid cries of, "Unmask! masks off, everybody!"

The Harlequin turned and drawing the black vizard from his face, bent low and saluted her hand; and she, responding gaily with a curtsey, looked up into the features of an utter stranger.

She stood silent a moment, the surprised smile stamped on her lips; then, in her turn, she slipped the mask from her eyes.

"*Voila!*" she cried. "*C'est moi!*"

After a moment he said, half to himself;

"I knew well enough that you must be unusual. But I hadn't any idea—any—idea——"

"Then—you are *not* disappointed in me, monsieur?'

"My only regret is that I had my hour, and wasted it. Those hours never sound twice for wandering harlequins."

"Poor Harlequin!" she said saucily—"I'm sorry, but even *your* magic can't recall a vanished hour! Poor, poor Harlequin! You were too generous to me!"

"And now you are going to forget me," he said. "That is to be my reward."

"Why—I don't think—I don't expect to forget you. I suppose I am likely to know you some day. . . . *Who* are you, please? Somebody very grand in New York?"

"My name is Quarren."

There was a silence; she glanced down at the ball-

room floor through the lattice screen, then slowly turned around to look at him again.

"Have you ever heard of me?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes."

"Are you disappointed?"

"Y-es. Pleasantly. . . . I supposed you to be—different."

He laughed:

"Has the world been knocking me very dreadfully to you, Mrs. Leeds?"

"No. . . . One's impressions form without any reason—and vaguely—from—nothing in particular. —I thought you were a very different sort of man.—I am glad you are not."

"That is charming of you."

"It's honest. I had no desire to meet the type of man I supposed you to be. Am I too frank?"

"No, indeed," he said, laughing, "but I'm horribly afraid that I really am the kind of man you imagined me."

"You are not."

"How do you know?"

"No," she said, shaking her pretty head, "you can't be."

He said, quoting her own words amiably: "I'm merely one of the necessary incidents of any social environment—like flowers and champagne——"

"Mr. Quarren!"

In her distress she laid an impulsive hand on his sleeve; he lifted it, laid it across the back of his own hand, and bowing, saluted it lightly, gaily.

"I am not offended," he said; "—I am what you supposed me."

"Please don't say it! You are not. I didn't know you; I was—prejudiced——"

"You'll find me out sooner or later," he said laughing, "so I might as well admit that your cap fitted me."

"It doesn't fit!" she retorted; "I was a perfect fool to say that!"

"As long as you like me," he returned, "does it make any difference what I am?"

"Of course it does! I'm not likely to find a man agreeable unless he's worth noticing."

"Am I?"

"Oh, gentle angler, I refuse to nibble. Be content that an hour out of my life has sped very swiftly in your company!"

She turned and laid her hand on the little gilt door. He opened it for her.

"You've been very nice to me," she said. "I won't forget you."

"You'll certainly forget me for that very reason. If I hadn't been nice I'd have been the exception. And you would have remembered."

She said with an odd smile:

"Do you suppose that pleasant things have been so common in my life that only the unpleasant episode makes any impression on my memory?"

"To really remember me as I want you to, you ought to have had something unpardonable to forgive me."

"Perhaps I have!" she said, daringly; and slipped past him and down the narrow stairs, her loup-mask fluttering from her elbow.

At the foot of the stairs she turned, looking back at him over her bare shoulder:

"I've mortally offended at least three important men by hiding up there with you. That is conceding *something* to your attractions, isn't it?"

"Everything. Will you let me find you some supper —and let the mortally offended suitors sit and whistle a bit longer?"

"Poor suitors—they've probably been performing heel-tattoos for an hour. . . . Very well, then—I feel unusually shameless to-night—and I'll go with you. But don't be disagreeable to me if a neglected and glowering young man rushes up and drags me away by the back hair."

"Who for example?"

"Barent Van Dyne, for instance."

"Oh, we'll side-step that youthful Knickerbocker," said Quarren, gaily. "Leave it to me, Mrs. Leeds."

"To behave so outrageously to Mr. Van Dyne is peculiarly horrid and wicked of me," she said. "But you don't realise that—and—the fact remains that you did *not* take your forfeit. And I've a lot to make up for that, haven't I?" she added so naïvely that they both gave way to laughter unrestrained.

The light touch of her arm on his, now guiding him amid the noisy, rollicking throngs, now yielding to his guidance, ceased as he threaded a way through the crush to a corner, and seated her at a table for two.

In a few moments he came back with all kinds of delectable things; went for more, returned laden, shamelessly pulled several palms between them and the noisy outer world, and seated himself beside her.

With napkin and plate on the low table beside her, she permitted him to serve her. As he filled her champagne glass she lifted it and looked across it at him:

"How did you discover my identity?" she asked. "I'm devoured by curiosity."

"Shall I tell you?"

"Please."

"I'll take a tumble in your estimation if I tell you."

"I don't think you will. Try it anyway."

"Very well then. Somebody told me."

"And you let me bet with you! And *you* bet on a *certainty!*"

"I did."

"Oh!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "is that good sportsmanship, Mr. Quarren?"

"No; very bad. And *that* was why I didn't take the forfeit. Now you understand."

She sat considering him, the champagne breaking in her glass.

"Yes, I do understand now. A good sportsman couldn't take a forfeit which he won betting on a certainty. . . . That wasn't a real wager, was it?"

"No, it wasn't."

"If it had been, I—I don't suppose you'd have let me go."

"Indeed not!"

They laughed, watching each other, curiously.

"Which ought to teach me never again to make any such highly original and sporting wagers," she said. "Anyway, you were perfectly nice about it. Of course you couldn't very well have been otherwise. Tell me, did you really suppose me to be attractive? You couldn't judge. How could you—under that mask?"

"Do you think that your mouth could have possibly belonged to any other kind of a face except your own?" he said coolly.

"Is my mouth unusual?"

"Very."

"How is it unusual?"

"I haven't analysed the matter, but it is somehow so indescribable that I guessed very easily what the other features must be."

"Oh, flattery! Oh, impudence! Do you remember when Falstaff said that the lion could always recognise the true prince? Shame on you, Mr. Quarren. You are not only a very adroit flatterer but a perfectly good sportsman after all—and the most gifted tormentor I ever knew in all my life. And I like you fine!" She laughed, and made a quick little gesture, partly arrested as he met her more than half way, touching the rim of his glass to hers. "To our friendship," he said.

"Our friendship," she repeated, gaily, "if the gods speed it."

"—And—its consequences," he added. "Don't forget those."

"What are they likely to be?"

"Who knows? That's the gamble! But let us recognise all kinds of possibilities, and drink to them, too. Shall we?"

"What do you mean by the consequences of friendship?" she repeated, hesitating.

"That is the interesting thing about a new friendship," he explained. "Nobody can ever predict what the consequences are to be. Are you afraid to drink to the sporting chances, hazards, accidents, and possibilities of our new friendship, Mrs. Leeds? *That* is a perfectly good sporting proposition."

She considered him, interested, her eyes full of smil-

"'To our new friendship, Monsieur

Harlequin!' she said lightly."

ing curiosity, perfectly conscious of the swift challenge of his lifted glass.

After a few seconds' hesitation she struck the ringing rim of her glass against his:

"To our new friendship, Monsieur Harlequin!" she said lightly—"with every sporting chance, worldly hazard, and heavenly possibility in it!"

For the first time the smile faded from his face, and something in his altered features arrested her glass at her very lips.

"How suddenly serious you seem," she said. "Have I said anything?"

He drained his glass; after a second she tasted hers, looked at him, finished it, still watching him.

"Really," she said; "you made me feel for a moment as though you and I were performing a solemn rite. That was a new phase of you to me—that exceedingly sudden and youthful gravity."

He remained silent. Into his mind, just for a second, and while in the act of setting the glass to his lips, there had flashed a flicker of pale clairvoyance. It seemed to illumine something within him which he had never believed in—another self.

For that single instant he caught a glimpse of it, then it faded like a spark in a confused dream.

He raised his head and looked gravely across at Strelsa Leeds; and level-eyed, smiling, inquisitive, she returned his gaze.

Could this brief contact with her have evoked in him a far-buried something which had never before given sign of existence? And could it have been anything resembling aspiration that had glimmered so palely out of an ordered and sordid commonplace personality

which, with all its talent for frivolity, he had accepted as his own?

Without reason a slight flush came into his cheeks.

"Why do you regard me so owlishly?" she asked, amused. "I repeat that you made me feel as though we were performing a sort of solemn rite when we drank our toast."

"You couldn't feel that way with such a thoroughly frivolous man as I am. Could you?"

"I'm rather frivolous myself," she admitted, laughing. "I really can't imagine why you made me feel so serious—or why you looked as though you were. I've no talent for solemnity. Have you?"

"I don't think so," he said. "What a terrible din everybody is making! How hot and stifling it is here—with all those cloying gardenias. . . . A man said, this evening, that this sort of thing makes for anarchy. . . . It's rather beastly of me to sit here criticising my host's magnificence. . . . Do you know—it's curious, too—but I wish that, for the next hour or two, you and I were somewhere alone under a good wide sky—where there was no noise. It's an odd idea, isn't it, Mrs. Leeds. And probably you don't share it with me."

She remained silent, thoughtful, her violet-gray eyes humorously considering him.

"How do you know I don't?" she said at last. "I'm not enamoured of noise, either."

"There's another thing," he went on, smiling—"it's rather curious, too—but somehow I've a sort of a vague idea that I've a lot of things to talk to you about. It's odd, isn't it?"

"Well you know," she reminded him, "you couldn't

very well have a lot of things to talk to me about considering the fact that we've known each other only an hour or so."

"It doesn't seem logical. . . . And yet, there's that inexplicable sensation of being on the verge of fairly bursting into millions of words for your benefit—words which all my life have been bottled up in me, accumulating, waiting for this opportunity."

They both were laughing, yet already a slight tension threatened both—had menaced them, vaguely, from the very first. It seemed to impend ever so slightly, like a margin of faintest shadow edging sunlight; yet it was always there.

"I haven't time for millions of words this evening," she said. "Won't some remain fresh and sparkling and epigrammatic until—until——"

"To-morrow? They'll possibly keep that long."

"I didn't say to-morrow."

"I did."

"I'm perfectly aware of the subtle suggestion and subtler flattery, Mr. Quarren."

"Then, may I see you to-morrow?"

"Utterly impossible—pitiably hopeless. You see I am frank about the heart-rending disappointment it is to me—and must be to you. But after I am awake I am in the hands of Mrs. Lannis. And there's no room for you in that pretty cradle."

"The next day, then?"

"We're going to Florida for three weeks."

"You?"

"Molly and Jim and I."

"Palm Beach?"

"Ultimately."

"And then?"

"Oh! Have you the effrontery to tell me to my face that you'll be in the same mind about me three weeks hence?"

"I have."

"Do you expect me to believe you?"

"I don't know—what to expect—of you, of myself," he said so quietly that she looked up quickly.

"Mr. Quarren! *Are* you a sentimental man? I had mentally absolved you from *that* preconception of mine—among other apparently unmerited ideas concerning you."

"I suppose you'll arise and flee if I tell you that you're different from other women," he said.

"You wouldn't be such an idiot as to tell me that, would you?"

"I might be. I'm just beginning to realise my capacity for imbecility. You're different in this way anyhow; no woman ever before induced me to pull a solemn countenance."

"I *don't* induce you! I ask you not to."

"I *try* not to; but, somehow, there's something so —so real about *you*——"

"Are you accustomed to foregather with the disembodied?"

"I'm beginning to think that my world is rather thickly populated with ghosts—phantoms of a more real world."

He looked at her soberly; she had thought him younger than he now seemed. A slight irritation silenced her for a moment, then, impatiently:

"You speak cynically and I dislike it. What reason have you to express world-weary sentiments?—you

who are young, who probably have never known real sorrow, deep unhappiness! I have little patience with a morbid view of anything, Mr. Quarren. I merely warn you—in the event of your ever desiring to obtain my good graces."

"I do desire them."

"Then be yourself."

"I don't know what I am. I thought I knew. Your advent has disorganised both my complacency and my resignation."

"What do you mean?"

"Must I answer?"

"Of course!" she said, laughing.

"Then—the Harlequin who followed you up those stairs, never came down again."

"Oh!" she said, unenlightened.

"I'm wondering who it was who came down out of that balcony in the wake of the golden dancer," he added.

"You and I—you very absurd young man. What are you trying to say?"

"I—wonder," he said, smiling, "what I am trying to say."

CHAPTER III

Sunshine illuminated the rose-silk curtains of Mrs. Leeds's bedroom with parallel slats of light and cast a frail and tremulous net of gold across her bed. The sparrows in the Japanese ivy seemed to be unusually boisterous, and their persistent metallic chatter disturbed Strelsa who presently unclosed her gray eyes upon her own reflected features in the wall-glass opposite.

Face still flushed with slumber, she lay there considering her mirrored features with humorous, sleepy eyes; then she sat up, stretched her arms, yawned, patted her red lips with her palm, pressed her knuckles over her eyelids, and presently slipped out of bed. Her bath was ready; so was her maid.

A little later, cross-legged on the bed once more, she sat sipping her chocolate and studying the morning papers with an interest and satisfaction unjaded.

Coupled with the naïve curiosity of a kitten remained her unspoiled capacity for pleasure, and the interest of a child in a world unfolding daily in a sequence of miracles under her intent and delighted eyes.

Bare of throat and arm and shoulder, the lustrous hair shadowing her face, she now appeared unexpectedly frail, even thin, as though the fuller curves of the mould in which she was being formed had not yet been filled up.

Fully dressed, gown and furs lent to her something of a youthful maturity which was entirely deceptive; for here, in bed, the golden daylight revealed childish contours accented so delicately that they seemed almost sexless. And in her intent gray eyes and in her undeveloped mind was all that completed the bodily and mental harmony—youth unawakened as yet except to a confused memory of pain—and the dreamy and passionless unconsciousness of an unusually late adolescence.

At twenty-four Strelsa still looked upon her morning chocolate with a healthy appetite; and the excitement of seeing her own name and picture in the daily press had as yet lost none of its delightful thrill.

All the morning papers reported the Wycherlys' house-warming with cloying detail. And she adored it. What paragraphs particularly concerned herself, her capable maid had enclosed in inky brackets. These Strelsa read first of all, warm with pleasure at every stereotyped tribute to her loveliness.

The comments she perused were of all sorts, even the ungrammatical sort, but she read them all with profound interest, and loved every one, even the most fulsome. For life, and its kinder experience, was just beginning for her after a shabby childhood, a lonely girlhood, and a marriage unspeakable, the memory of which already had become to her as vaguely poignant as the dull recollection of a nightmare.

So her appetite for kindness, even the newspaper variety, was keen and not at all discriminating; and the reaction from two years' solitude—two years of endurance, of shrinking from public comment—had developed in her a fierce longing for pleasure and for

play-fellows. Her fellow-men had responded with an enthusiasm which still surprised her delightfully at moments.

The clever Swedish maid now removed the four-legged tray from her knees; Strelsa, propped on her pillows, was still intent on her newspapers, satisfying a natural curiosity concerning what the world thought about her costume of the night before, her beauty, herself, and the people she knew. At last, agreeably satiated, she lowered the newspaper and lay back, dreamy-eyed, faintly smiling, lost in pleasant retrospection.

Had she really appeared as charming last night as these exceedingly kind New York newspapers pretended? Did this jolly world really consider her so beautiful? She wished to believe it. She tried to. Perhaps it was really true—because all these daily paragraphs, which had begun with her advent into certain New York sets, must really have been founded on something unusual about her.

And it could not be her fortune which continued to inspire such journalistic loyalty and devotion, because she had none—scarcely enough money in fact to manage with, dress with, pay her servants, and maintain her pretty little house in the East Eighties.

It could not be her wit; she had no more than the average American girl. Nor was there anything else in her—neither her cultivation, attainments, nor talents—to entitle her to distinction. So apparently it must be her beauty that evoked paragraphs which had already made her a fashion in the metropolis—was making her a cult—even perhaps a notoriety.

"Strelsa, propped on her pillows,

was still intent on her newspapers."

Because those people who had personally known Reginald Leeds, were exceedingly curious concerning this young girl who had been a nobody, as far as New York was concerned, until her name became legally coupled with the name of one of the richest and most dissipated scions of an old and honourable New York family.

The public which had read with characteristic eagerness all about the miserable finish of Reginald Leeds, found its abominable curiosity piqued by his youthful widow's appearance in town.

It is the newspapers' business to give the public what it wants—at least that appears to be the popular impression; and so they gave the public all it wanted about Strelsa Leeds, in daily chunks. And then some. Which, in the beginning, she shrank from, horrified, frightened, astonished—because, in the beginning, every mention of her name was coupled with a glossary in full explanation of who she was, entailing a condensed review of a sordid story which, for two years, she had striven to obliterate from her mind. But these post-mortems lasted only a week or so. Except for a sporadic eruption of the case in a provincial paper now and then, which somebody always thoughtfully sent to her, the press finally let the tragedy alone, contenting its intellectual public with daily chronicles of young Mrs. Leeds's social activities.

A million boarding houses throughout the land, read about her beauty with avidity; and fat old women in soiled pink wrappers began to mention her intimately to each other as " Strelsa Leeds "—the first hall-mark of social fame—and there was loud discussion, in a million humble homes, about the fashionable men who were pay-

ing her marked attention; and the chances she had for bagging earls and dukes were maintained and combated, below stairs and above, with an eagerness, envy, and back-stairs knowledge truly and profoundly democratic.

Her morning mail had begun to assume almost fashionable proportions, but she could not yet reconcile herself to the idea of even such a clever maid as her own assuming power of social secretary. So she still read and answered all her letters—or rather neglected to notice the majority, which invested her with a kind of awe to some and made others furious and unwillingly respectful.

Letters, bills, notes, invitations, advertisements were scattered over the bedclothes as she lay there, thinking over the pleasures and excitement of last night's folly—thinking of Quarren, among others, and of the swift intimacy that had sprung up between them—like a witch-flower over night—thinking of her imprudence, and of the cold displeasure of Barent Van Dyne who, toward daylight, had found her almost nose to nose with Quarren, absorbed in exchanging with that young man ideas and perfectly futile notions about everything on top, inside, and underneath the habitable globe.

She blushed as she remembered her flimsy excuses to Van Dyne—she had the grace to blush over that memory—and how any of the dignity incident to the occasion had been all Van Dyne's—and how, as she took his irreproachable arm and parted ceremoniously with Quarren, she had imprudently extended her hand behind her as her escort bore her away—a childish impulse—

the innocent coquetry of a village belle—she flushed again at the recollection—and at the memory of Quarren's lips on her finger-tips—and how her hand had closed on the gardenia he pressed into it——

She turned her head on the pillow; the flower she had taken from him lay beside her on her night table, limp, discoloured, malodorous; and she picked it up, daintily, and flung it into the fireplace.

At the same moment the telephone rang downstairs in the library. Presently her maid knocked, announcing Mr. Quarren on the wire.

"I'm not at home," said Strelsa, surprised, or rather trying to feel a certain astonishment. What really surprised her was that she felt none.

Her maid was already closing the door behind her when Strelsa said:

"Wait a moment, Freda." And, after thinking, she smiled to herself and added: "You may set my transmitter on the table beside me, and hang up the receiver in the library. . . . Be sure to hang it up at once."

Then, sitting up in bed, she unhooked the receiver and set it to her ear.

"Mr. Quarren," she began coldly, and without preliminary amenities, "have you any possible excuse for awaking me at such an unearthly hour as mid-day?"

"Good Lord," he exclaimed contritely, "did I do that?"

She had no more passion for the exact truth than the average woman, and she quibbled:

"Do you think I would say so if it were not true?" she demanded.

"No, of course not——"

"Well, then!" An indignant pause. "But," she added honestly, "I was not exactly what you might call asleep, although it practically amounts to the same thing. I was reposing. . . . Are *you* feeling quite fit this morning?" she added demurely.

"I'd be all right if I could see you——"

"You can't! What an idea!"

"Why not? What are you going to do?"

"There's no particular reason why I should detail my daily duties, obligations, and engagements to you; is there?—But I'm an unusually kind-hearted person, and not easily offended by people's inquisitiveness. So I'll overlook your bad manners. First, then, I am lunching at the Province Club, then I am going to a matinée at the Casino, afterward dropping in for tea at the Sprowls, dining at the Calderas, going to the Opera with the Vernons, and afterward, with them, to a dance at the Van Dynes. . . . So, will you kindly inform me where *you* enter the scene?"

She could hear him laugh over the telephone.

"What are you doing just now?" he asked.

"I am seated upon my innocent nocturnal couch, draped in exceedingly intimate attire, conversing over the telephone with the original Paul Pry."

"Could anything induce you to array yourself more conventionally, receive me, and let me take you to your luncheon at the Province Club?"

"But I don't *wish* to see you."

"Is that perfectly true?"

"Perfectly. I've just thrown your gardenia into the fireplace. Doesn't that prove it?"

"Oh, no. Because it's too early, yet, for either of us to treasure such things——"

"What horrid impertinence!"

"Isn't it! But your heavenly gift of humour will transform my impudence into a harmless and diverting sincerity. Please let me see you, Mrs. Leeds—just for a few moments."

"Why?"

"Because you are going South and there are three restless weeks ahead of me——"

This time he could hear her clear, far laughter:

"What has *my* going to Florida to do with *your* restlessness?"

"Your very question irrevocably links cause and effect——"

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Quarren!"

"Absurdity is the badge of all our Guild——"

"What Guild do *you* belong to?"

"The associated order of ardent suitors——"

"Mr. Quarren! You are becoming ridiculous; do you know it?"

"No, *I* don't realise it, but they say all the rest of the world considers suitors ridiculous——"

"Do you expect me to listen to such nonsense at such an hour in the morning?"

"It's half past twelve; and my weak solution of nonsense is suitable to the time of day——"

"Am I to understand that the solution becomes stronger as the day advances?"

"Exactly; the solution becomes so concentrated and powerful that traces of common-sense begin to appear——"

"I didn't notice any last night."

"Van Dyne interfered."

"Poor Mr. Van Dyne. If you'd been civil to him

he might have asked you to the dance to-night—if I had suggested it. But you were horridly rude."

"I? Rude?"

"You're not going to be rude enough to say it was I who behaved badly to him, are you? Oh, the shocking vanity of man! No doubt you are thinking that it was I who, serpent-like, whispered temptation into your innocent ear, and drew you away into a corner, and shoved palms in front of us, and brought silver and fine linen, and rare fruits and sparkling wines; and paid shameless court with an intelligent weather-eye always on the watch for a flouted and justly indignant cavalier!"

"Yes," he said, "you did all those things. And now you're trying to evade the results."

"What are the results?"

"A partly demented young man clamouring to see you at high-noon while the cold cruel cause of his lunacy looks on and laughs."

"I'm afraid that young man must continue to clamour," she said, immensely amused at the picture he drew. "How far away is he at this moment?"

"In the Legation, a blithering wreck."

"Why not in his office frantically immersed in vast business enterprises and cataclysmic speculations?"

"I'm rather afraid that if business immerses him too completely he will be found drowned some day."

"You promised—*said* that you were going to begin a vigorous campaign," she reminded him reproachfully. "I asked it of you; and you agreed."

"I am beginning life anew—or trying to—by seeking the perennial source of daily spiritual and mundane inspiration——"

"Why won't you be serious?"

"I am. Were you not the source of my new inspiration? Last night did something or other to me—I am not yet perfectly sure what it was. I want to see you to be sure—if only for a—moment—merely to satisfy myself that you are real——"

"Will one moment be enough?"

"Certainly."

"One second—or half a one?"

"Plenty."

"Very well—if you promise not to expect or ask for more than that——"

"That is terribly nice of you!"

"It is, overwhelmingly. But really I don't know whether I am nice or merely weak-minded. Because I've lingered here gossiping so long with you that I've simply got to fly like a mad creature about my dressing. Good-bye——"

"Shall I come up immediately?"

"Of course not! I expect to be dressing for hours and hours—figuratively speaking. . . . Perhaps you might start in ten minutes if you are coming in a taxi."

"You are an angel——"

"That is not telephone vernacular. . . . And perhaps you had better be prompt, because Mrs. Lannis is coming for me—that is, if you have anything to—to say—that——"

She flushed up, annoyed at her own stupidity, then felt grateful to him as he answered lightly:

"Of course; she might misunderstand our informality. Shall I see you in half an hour?"

"If I can manage it," she said.

She managed it, somehow. At first, really indiffer-

ent, and not very much amused, the talk with him had gradually aroused in her the same interest and pleasurable curiosity that she had experienced in exchanging badinage with him the night before. Now she really wanted to see him, and she took enough trouble about it to set her deft maid flying about her offices.

First a fragrant precursor of his advent arrived in the shape of a great bunch of winter violets; and her maid fastened them to her black fox muff. Then the distant door-bell sounded; and in an extraordinarily short space of time, wearing her pretty fur hat, her boa, and carrying a muff that matched both, with his violets pinned to it, she entered the dim drawing-room, halting just beyond the threshold.

"Are you not ashamed," she said, severely, "to come battering at my door at this hour of the day?"

"Abjectly."

They exchanged a brief handshake; she seated herself on the arm of a sofa; he stood before the unlighted fireplace, looking at her with a half smiling half curious air which made her laugh outright.

"Bien! C'est moi, monsieur," she said. "Me voici! C'est moi-même!"

"I believe you *are* real after all," he admitted.

"Do I seem different?"

"Yes—and no."

"How am I different?"

"Well, somehow, last night, I got the notion that you were younger, thinner—and not very real——"

"Are you presuming to criticise my appearance last night?" she asked with mock indignation. "Because if you are, I proudly refer you to the enlightened metropolitan morning press."

"I read all about you," he said, smiling.

"I am glad you did. You will doubtless now be inclined to treat me with the respect due to my years and experience."

"I believe," he said, "that your gown and hat and furs make a charming difference——"

"How perfectly horrid of you! I thought you admired my costume last night!"

"Oh, Lord," he said—"you were sufficiently charming last night. But now, in your fluffy furs, you seem rather taller—less slender perhaps—and tremendously fetching——"

"Say that my clothes improve me, and that in reality I'm a horrid, thin little beast!" she exclaimed, laughing. "I know I am, but I haven't finished growing yet. Really that's the truth, Mr. Quarren. Would you believe that I have grown an inch since last spring?"

"I believe it," he said, "but would you mind stopping now? You are exactly right."

"You *know* I'm thin and flat as a board!"

"You're perfect!"

"It's too late to say that to me——"

"It is too early to say more."

"Let's don't talk about myself, please."

"It has become the only subject in the world that interests me——"

"Please, Mr. Quarren! Are you actually attempting to be silly at this hour of the day? The wise inanities of midnight sound perilously flat in the sunshine—flatter than the flattest champagne, which no bread-crumbs can galvanise into a single bubble. Tell me, why did you wish to see me this morning. I mean the

real reason? Was it merely to find out whether I was weak-minded enough to receive you?"

He looked at her, smiling:

"I wanted to see whether you were as real and genuine and wholesome and unspoiled and—and friendly as I thought you were last night."

"Am I?"

"More so."

"Are you so sure about my friendliness?"

"I want to believe in it," he said. "It means a lot to me already."

"Believe in it then, you very badly spoiled young man," she said, stretching out her hand to him impulsively. "I do like you. . . . And now I think you had better go — unless you want to see Mrs. Lannis."

Retaining her hand for a second he said:

"Before you leave town will you let me ask you a question?"

"I am leaving to-morrow. You'll have to ask it now."

Their hands fell apart; he seemed doubtful, and she awaited his question, smilingly. And as he made no sign of asking she said:

"You have my permission to ask it. Is it a very impertinent question?"

"Very."

"How impertinent is it?" she inquired curiously.

"Unpardonably personal."

After a silence she laughed.

"Last night," she said, "you told me that I would probably forget you unless I had something unpardonable to forgive you. Isn't this a good opportunity to

leave your unpardonable imprint upon my insulted memory?"

"Excellent," he said. "This is my outrageous question: are you engaged to be married?"

For a full minute she remained silent in her intense displeasure. After the first swift glance of surprise her gray eyes had dropped, and she sat on the gilded arm of the sofa, studying the floor covering—an ancient Saraband rug, with the inevitable and monotonous river-loop symbol covering its old-rose ground in uninteresting repetition. After a while she lifted her head and met his gaze, quietly..

"I am trying to believe that you did not mean to be offensive," she said. "And now that I have a shadow of a reason to pardon you, I shall probably do so, ultimately."

"But you won't answer me?" he said, reddening.

"Of course not. Are we on any such footing of intimacy—even of friendship, Mr. Quarren?"

"No. But you are going away—and my reason for speaking—" He checked himself; his reasons were impossible; there was no extenuation to be found in them, no adequate explanation for them, or for his attitude toward this young girl which had crystallised over night—over a sleepless, thrilling night—dazzling him with its wonder and its truth and its purity in the clean rays of the morning sun.

She watched his expression as it changed, troubled, uncertain how to regard him, now.

"It isn't very much like you, to ask me such a question," she said.

"Before I met you, you thought me one kind of a

man; after I met you, you thought me another. Have I turned out to be a third kind?"

"N-no."

"Would I turn into the first kind if I ask you again to answer my question?"

She gave him a swift, expressionless glance:

"I want to like you; I'm trying to, Mr. Quarren. Won't you let me?"

"I want to have the right to like *you*, too—perhaps more than you will care to have me——"

"Please don't speak that way—I don't know what you mean, anyway——"

"That is why I asked you the question—to find out whether I had a right to——"

"Right!" she repeated. "What right? What do you mean? What have you misinterpreted in me that has given you any rights as far as I am concerned? Did you misunderstand our few hours of masked acquaintance—a few moments of perfectly innocent imprudence?—my overlooking certain conventions and listening to you at the telephone this morning—my receiving you here at this silly hour? What has given you any right to say anything to me, Mr. Quarren—to hint of the possibility of anything serious—for the future—or at any time whatever?"

"I have no right," he said, wincing.

"Indeed you have not!" she rejoined warmly, flushed and affronted. "I am glad that is perfectly clear to you."

"No right at all," he repeated—"except the personal privilege of recognising what is cleanest and sweetest and most admirable and most unspoiled in life; the right to care for it without knowing exactly why—

the desire to be part of it—as have all men who are awakened out of trivial dreams when such a woman as you crosses their limited and foolish horizon."

She sat staring at him, struggling to comprehend what he was saying, perfectly unable to believe, nor even wishing to, yet painfully attentive to his every word.

"Mr. Quarren," she said, "I was hurt. I imagined presumption where there was none. But I am afraid you are romantic and impulsive to an amazing degree. Yet, both romance and impulse have a place and a reason, not undignified, in human intercourse."—She felt rather superior in turning this phrase, and looked on him a little more kindly——

"If the compliment which you have left me to infer is purely a romantic one, it is nevertheless unwarranted —and, forgive me, unacceptable. The trouble is——"

She paused to recover her wits and her breath; but he took the latter away again as he said:

"I am in love with you; that is the trouble, Mrs. Leeds. And I really have no business to say so until I amount to something."

"You have no business to say so anyway after one single evening's acquaintance!" she retorted hotly.

"Oh, that! If love were a matter of time and convention—like five o'clock tea!—but it isn't, you know. It isn't the brevity of our acquaintance that worries me; it's what *I* am—and what *you* are—and—and the long, long road I have to travel before I am worth your lightest consideration—I never was in love before. Forgive my crudeness. I'm only conscious of the—hopelessness of it all."

Breathless, confused, incredulous, she sat there

staring at him—listening to and watching this tall, quiet, cool young fellow who was telling her such incomprehensible things in a manner that began to fascinate her. With an effort she collected herself, shook off the almost eerie interest that was already beginning to obsess her, and stood up, flushed but composed.

"Shall we not say any more about it?" she said quietly. "Because there is nothing more to say, Mr. Quarren—except—thank you for—for feeling so amiably toward me—for believing me more than I really am. . . . And I would like to have your friendship still, if I may——"

"You have it."

"Even yet?"

"Why not? . . . It's selfish of me to say it—but I wish you—could have saved me," he said almost carelessly.

"From what, Mr. Quarren?" I really do not understand you."

"From being what I am—the sort of man you first divined me to be."

"What do you mean by 'saving' you?" she asked, coldly.

"I don't know!—giving me a glimmer of hope I suppose—something to strive for."

"One saves one's self," she said.

He turned an altered face toward her: and she looked at him intently.

"I guess you are right," he said with a short laugh. "If there is anything worth saving, one saves one's self."

"I think that is true," she said. . . . "And—if my friendship—if you really care for it——"

He met her gaze:

"I honestly don't know. I've been carried off my feet by you, completely. A man, under such conditions, doesn't know anything—not even enough to hold his tongue—as you may have noticed. I am in love with you. As I am to-day, my love for you would do you no good—I don't know whether yours would do me any good—or your friendship, either. It ought to if I amounted to anything; but I don't—and I don't know."

"I wish you would not speak so bitterly—please——"

"All right. It wasn't bitterness; it was just whine. . . . I'll go, now. You will comprehend, after you think it over, that there is at least nothing of impertinence in my loving you—only a blind unreason—a deadly fear lest the other man in me, suddenly revealed, vanish before I could understand him. Because when I saw you, life's meaning broke out suddenly—like a star—and that's another stale simile. But one has to climb very far before one can touch even the nearest of the stars. . . . So forgive my one lucid interval. . . . I shall probably never have another. . . . May I take you to your carriage?"

"Mrs. Lannis is calling for me."

"Then—I will take my leave—and the tatters of my reputation—any song can buy it, now——"

"Mr. Quarren!"

"Yes?"

"I don't want you to go—like this. I want you to go away knowing in your heart that you have been very—nice—agreeable—to a young girl who hasn't perhaps had as much experience as you think——"

"Thank God," he said, smiling.

"I want you to like me, always," she said. "Will you?"

"I promise," he replied so blithely that for a moment his light irony deceived her. Then something in his eyes left her silent, concerned, unresponsive—only her heart seemed to repeat persistently in childish reiteration, the endless question, Why? Why? Why? And she heard it but found no answer where love was not, and had never been.

"I—am sorry," she said in a low voice. "I—I try to understand you—but I don't seem to. . . . I am so *very* sorry that you—care for me."

He took her gloved hand, and she let him.

"I guess I'm nothing but a harlequin after all," he said, "and they're legitimate objects for pity. Goodbye, Mrs. Leeds. You've been very patient and sweet with a blithering lunatic. . . . I've committed only another harlequinade of a brand-new sort. But the fall from that balcony would have been less destructive."

She looked at him out of her gray eyes.

"One thing," she said, with a tremulous smile, "you may be certain that I am not going to forget you very easily."

"Another thing," he said, "I shall never forget you as long as I live; and—you have my violets, I see. Are they to follow the gardenia?"

"Only when their time comes," she said, trying to laugh.

So he wished her a happy trip and sojourn in the South, and went away into the city—downtown, by the way to drop into an office chair in an empty office and listen to the click of a typewriter in the outer room, and

sit there hour after hour with his chin in his hand staring at nothing out of the clear blue eyes of a boy.

And she went away to her luncheon at the Province Club with Susanne Lannis who wished her to meet some of the governors—very grand ladies—upon whose good will depended Strelsa's election to the most aristocratic, comfortable, wisely managed, and thriftiest of all metropolitan clubs.

After luncheon she, with Mrs. Lannis and Chrysos Lacy—a pretty red-haired edition of her brother—went to see "Sumurun."

And after they had tea at the redoubtable Mrs. Sprowl's, where there were more footmen than guests, more magnificence than comfort, and more wickedness in the gossip than lemon in the tea or Irish in the more popular high-ball.

The old lady, fat, pink, enormous, looked about her out of her little glittering green eyes with a pleased conviction that everybody on earth was mortally afraid of her. And everybody, who happened to be anybody in New York, was exactly that—with a few eccentric exceptions like her nephew, Karl Westguard, and half a dozen heavily upholstered matrons whose social altitude left them nothing to be afraid of except lack of deference and death.

Mrs. Sprowl had a fat, wheezy, and misleading laugh; and it took time for Strelsa to understand that there was anything really venomous in the old lady; but the gossip there that afternoon, and the wheezy delight in driving a last nail into the coffin of some moribund reputation, made plain to her why her hostess was held in such respectful terror.

The talk finally swerved from Molly Wycherly's

ball to the Irish Legation, and Mrs. Sprowl leaned toward Strelsa, and panted behind her fan:

"A perfect scandal, child. The suppers those young men give there! Orgies, I understand! No pretty actress in town is kept sighing long for invitations. Even "—she whispered the name of a lovely and respectable prima-donna with a perfectly good husband and progeny—and nodded so violently that it set her coughing.

"Oh," cried Strelsa, distressed, "surely you have been misinformed!"

"Not in the least," wheezed the old lady. "She is no better than the rest of 'em! And I sent for my nephew Karl, and I brought him up roundly. 'Karl!' said I, 'what the devil do you mean! Do you want that husband of hers dragging you all into court?' And, do you know, my dear, he appeared perfectly astounded—said it wasn't so—just as you said a moment ago. But I can put two and two together, yet; I'm not too old and witless to do that! And I warrant you I gave him a tongue trouncing which he won't forget. . . . Probably he retailed it to that O'Hara man, and to young Quarren, too. If he did it won't hurt 'em, either."

She was speaking now so generally that everybody heard her, and Cyrille Caldera said:

"Ricky is certainly innocuous, anyway."

"Oh, *is* he!" said Mrs. Sprowl with another wheezy laugh. "I fancy I know that boy. Did you say 'harmless,' Susanne? Well, *you* ought to know, of course——"

Cyrille Caldera blushed brightly although her affair with Quarren had been of the most innocent description.

"'A perfect scandal, child. The sup-

pers those young men give there!'"

"There's probably as much ground for indicting Ricky as there is for indicting me," she protested. "He's merely a nice, useful boy——"

"Rather vapid, don't you think?" observed a thin young woman in sables and an abundance of front teeth.

"Who expects anything serious from Ricky? He possesses good manners, and a sweet alacrity," said Chrysos Lacy, "and that's a rare combination."

"He's clever enough to be wicked, anyway," said Mrs. Sprowl. "Don't tell me that every one of his sentimental affairs have been perfectly harmless."

"Has he had many?" asked Strelsa before she meant to.

"Thousands, child. There was Betty Clyde—whose husband must have been an idiot—and Cynthia Challis—she married Prince Sarnoff, you remember——"

"The Sarnoffs are coming in February," observed Chrysos Lacy.

"I wonder if the Prince has had a tub since he left," said Mrs. Sprowl. "How on earth Cynthia can endure that dried up yellow Tartar——"

"Cynthia was in love with Ricky I think," said Susanne Lannis.

"Most girls are when they come out, but their mothers won't let 'em marry him. Poor Ricky."

"Poor Ricky," sighed Chrysos; "he is *so* nice, and nobody is likely to marry him."

"Why?" asked Strelsa.

"Because he's—why he's just Ricky. He has no money, you know. Didn't you know it?"

"No," said Strelsa.

"That's the trouble—partly. Then there's no social advantage for any girl in this set marrying him. He'll have to take a lame duck or go out of his circle for a wife. And that means good-bye Ricky—unless he marries a lame duck."

"Some unattractive person of uncertain age and a million," explained Mrs. Lannis as Strelsa turned to her, perplexed.

"Ricky," said the lady with abundant teeth, "is a lightweight."

"The lightness, I think, is in his heels," said Strelsa. "He's intelligent otherwise I fancy."

"Yes, but not intellectual."

"I think you are possibly mistaken."

The profusely dentate lady looked sharply at Strelsa; Susanne Lannis laughed.

"Are *you* his champion, Strelsa? I thought you had met him last night for the first time."

"Mrs. Leeds is probably going the way of all women when they first meet Dicky Quarren," observed Mrs. Sprowl with malicious satisfaction. "But you must hurry and get over it, child, before Sir Charles Mallison arrives." At which sally everybody laughed.

Strelsa's colour was high, but she merely smiled, not only at the coupling of her name with Quarren's but at the hint of the British officer's arrival.

Major Sir Charles Mallison had been over before, why, nobody knew, because he was one of the wealthiest bachelors in England. Now it was understood that he was coming again; and a great many well-meaning people saw that agreeable gentleman's fate in the new beauty, Strelsa Leeds; and did not hesitate to tell her so with the freedom of fashionable banter.

"Yes," sighed Chrysos Lacy, sentimentally, "when you see Sir Charles you'll forget Ricky."

"Doubtless," said Strelsa, still laughing. "But tell me, Mrs. Sprowl, why does everybody wish to marry me to somebody? I'm very happy."

"It's our feminine sense of fitness and proportion that protests. In the eternal balance of things material you ought to be as wealthy as you are pretty."

"I have enough—almost——"

"Ah! the 'almost' betrays the canker feeding on that damask cheek!" laughed Mrs. Lannis. "No, you must marry millions, Strelsa—you'll need them."

"You are mistaken. I *have* enough. I'd like to be happy for a while."

The naïve inference concerning the incompatibility of marriage and happiness made them laugh again, forgetting perhaps the tragic shadow of the past which had unconsciously evoked it.

After Strelsa and Mrs. Lannis had gone, a pair of old cats dropped in, one in ermine, the other in sea-otter; and the inevitable discussion of Strelsa Leeds began with a brutality and frankness paralleled only in kennel parlance.

To a criticism of the girl's slenderness of physique Mrs. Sprowl laughed loud and long.

"That's what's setting all the men crazy. The world's as full of curves as I am; plumpness to the verge of redundancy is supposed to be popular among men; a well-filled stocking behind the footlights sets the gaby agape. But your man of the world has other tastes."

"Jaded tastes," said somebody.

"Maybe they're jaded and vicious—but they're

his. And maybe that girl has a body and limbs which are little more accented than a boy's. But it's the last shriek among people who know."

"Not such a late one, either," said somebody. "Who was the French sculptor who did the Merode?"

"Before that Lippo fixed the type," observed somebody else.

"Personally," remarked a third, "I don't fancy pipe-stems. Mrs. Leeds needs padding—to suit my notions."

"Wait a year," said Mrs. Sprowl, significantly. "The beauty of that girl will be scandalous when she fills out a little more. . . . If she only had the wits to match what she is going to be!—But there's a streak of something silly in her—I suspect latent sentiment—which is likely to finish her if she doesn't look sharp. Fancy her taking up the cudgels for Ricky, now!—a boy whose wits would be of no earthly account except in doing what he is doing. And he's apparently persuaded that little minx that he's intellectual! I'll have to talk to Ricky."

"You'd better talk to your nephew, too," said somebody, laughing.

"Who? Karl!" exclaimed the old lady, her little green eyes mere sparks in the broad expanse of face. "Let me catch him mooning around that girl! Let me catch Ricky philandering in earnest! I've made up my mind about Strelsa Leeds, and"—she glared around her, fanning vigorously—"I *think* nobody is likely to interfere.

That evening, at the opera, Westguard came into her box, and she laid down the law of limits to him so

decisively that, taken aback, astonished and chagrined, he found nothing to say for the moment.

When he did recover his voice and temper he informed her very decidedly that he'd follow his own fancy as far as any woman was concerned.

But she only laughed derisively and sent him off to bring Quarren who had entered the Vernons' box and was bending over Strelsa's shoulders.

When Quarren obeyed, which he did not do with the alacrity she had taught him, she informed him with a brevity almost contemptuous that his conduct with Strelsa at the Wycherlys had displeased her.

He said, surprised: "Why does it concern you? Mrs. Wycherly is standing sponsor for Mrs. Leeds——"

"I shall relieve Molly Wycherly of any responsibility," said the old lady. "I like that girl. Can Molly do as much as I can for her?"

He remained silent, disturbed, looking out across the glitter at Strelsa.

Men crowded the Vernons' box, arriving in shoals and departing with very bad grace when it became necessary to give place to new arrivals.

"Do you see?" said the old lady, tendering him her opera glass.

"What?" he asked sullenly.

"A new planet. Use your telescope, Rix—and also amass a little common-sense. Yonder sits a future duchess, or a countess, if I care to start things for her. Which I shan't—in that direction."

"There are no poor duchesses or countesses, of course," he remarked with an unpleasant laugh.

Mrs. Sprowl looked at him ironically.

"I understand the Earl of Dankmere, perfectly," she said—"also other people, including young, and sulky boys. So if you clearly understand my wishes, and the girl doesn't make a fool of herself over you or any other callow ineligible, her future will give me something agreeable to occupy me."

The blood stung his face as he stood up—a tall graceful figure among the others in the box—a clean-cut, wholesome boy to all appearances, with that easy and amiable presence which is not distinction but which sometimes is even more agreeable.

Lips compressed, the flush still hot on his face, he stood silent, tasting all the bitterness that his career had stored up for him—sick with contempt for a self that could accept and swallow such things. For he had been well schooled, but scarcely to that contemptible point.

"Of course," he said, pleasantly, "you understand that I shall do as I please."

Mrs. Sprowl laughed:

"I'll see to that, too, Ricky."

Chrysos Lacy leaned forward and began to talk to him, and his training reacted mechanically, for he seemed at once to become his gay and engaging self.

He did not return to the Vernons' box nor did he see Strelsa again before she went South.

The next night a note was delivered to him, written from the Wycherlys' car, "Wind-Flower."

"My dear Mr. Quarren:

"Why did you not come back to say good-bye? You spoke of doing so. I'm afraid Chrysos Lacy is responsible.

"The dance at the Van Dynes was very jolly. I am exceedingly sorry you were not there. Thank you for the flowers and bon-bons that were delivered to me in my state-room. My violets are not yet entirely faded, so they have not yet joined your gardenia in the limbo of useless things.

"Mr. Westguard came to the train. He *is* nice.

"Mr. O'Hara and Chrysos and Jack Lacy were there, so in spite of your conspicuous absence the Legation maintained its gay reputation and covered itself with immortal blarney.

"This letter was started as a note to thank you for your gifts, but it is becoming a serial as Molly and Jim and I sit here watching the North Carolina landscape fly past our windows like streaks of brown lightened only by the occasional delicious and sunny green of some long-leafed pine.

"There's nothing to see from horizon to horizon except the monotonous repetition of mules and niggers and evil-looking cypress swamps and a few razor-backs and a buzzard flying very high in the blue.

"Thank you again for my flowers. . . . I wonder if you understand that my instinct is to be friends with you?

"It was from the very beginning.

"And please don't be absurd enough to think that I am going to forget you—or our jolly escapade at the Wycherly ball. You behaved very handsomely once. I know I can count on your kindness to me.

"Good-bye, and many many thanks—as Jack Lacy says—'f'r the manny booggy-rides, an' th' goom-candy, an' the boonches av malagy grrapes'!

"Sincerely your friend,

"Strelsa Leeds."

That same day Sir Charles Mallison arrived in New York and went directly to Mrs. Sprowl's house. Their interview was rather brief but loudly cordial on the old lady's part:

"How's my sister and Foxy?" she asked—meaning Sir Renard and Lady Spinney.

Sir Charles regretted he had not seen them.

"And you?"

"Quite fit, thanks." And he gravely trusted that her own health was satisfactory.

"You haven't changed your mind?" she asked with a smile which the profane might consider more like a grin.

Sir Charles said he had not, and a healthy colour showed under the tan.

"All these years," commented the old lady, ironically.

"Four," said Sir Charles.

"Was it four years ago when you saw her in Egypt?"

"Four years—last month—the tenth."

"And never saw her again?"

"Never."

Mrs. Sprowl shook with asthmatic mirth:

"Such story-book constancy! Why didn't you ask your friend the late Sirdar to have Leeds pitched into the Nile. It would have saved you those four years' waiting? You know you haven't many years to waste, Sir Charles."

"I'm forty-five," he said, colouring painfully.

"Four years gone to hell," said the old lady with that delicate candour which sometimes characterised her. . . . "And now what do you propose to do with the rest of 'em? Dawdle away your time?"

"'Is—Mrs. Leeds—well?' he ven

ured at length, reddening again."

"Face my fate," he admitted touching his moustache and fearfully embarrassed.

"Well, if you're in a hurry, you'll have to go down South to face it. She's at Palm Beach for the next three weeks."

"Thank you," he said.

She looked up at him, her little opaque green eyes a trifle softened.

"I am trying to get you the prettiest woman in America," she said. "I'm ready to fight off everybody else—beat 'em to death," she added, her eyes snapping, then suddenly kind again—"because, Sir Charles, I like you. And for no other reason on earth!"

Which was not the exact truth. It was for another man's sake she was kind to him. And the other man had been dead many years.

Sir Charles thanked her, awkwardly, and fell silent again, pulling his moustache.

"Is—Mrs. Leeds—well?" he ventured, at length, reddening again.

"Perfectly. She's a bit wiry just now—thin—leggy, y' know. Some fanciers prefer 'em weedy. But she'll plump up. I know the breed."

He shrank from her loud voice and the vulgarity of her comments, and she was aware of it and didn't care a rap. There were plenty of noble ladies as vulgar as she, and more so—and anyway it was not this well-built, sober-faced man of forty-five whom she was serving with all the craft and insolence and brutality and generosity that was in her—it was the son of a dead man who had been much to her. How much nobody in these days gossiped about any longer, for it was a long time ago, a long, long time ago that she had made her curtsey to

a young queen and a prince consort. And Sir Charles's father had died at Majuba Hill.

"There's a wretched little knock-kneed peer on the cards," she observed; "Dankmere. He seems to think she has money or something. If he comes over here, as my sister writes, I'll set him straighter than his own legs. And I've written Foxy to tell him so."

"Dankmere is a very good chap," said Sir Charles, terribly embarrassed.

"But not good enough. His level is the Quartier d'Europe. He'll find it; no fear. . . . When do you go South?"

"To-morrow," he said, so honestly that she grinned again.

"Then I'll give you a letter to Molly Wycherly. Her husband is Jim Wycherly—one of your sort—eternally lumbering after something to kill. He has a bungalow on some lagoon where he murders ducks, and no doubt he'll go there. But his wife will be stopping at Palm Beach. I'll send you a letter to her in the morning."

"Many thanks," said Sir Charles, shyly.

CHAPTER IV

Strelsa remained South longer than she had expected to remain, and at the end of the third week Quarren wrote her.

"Dear Mrs. Leeds:

"Will you accept from me a copy of Karl's new book? And are you ever coming back? You are missing an unusually diverting winter; the opera is exceptional, there are some really interesting plays in town and several new and amusing people—Prince and Princess Sarnoff for example; and the Earl of Dankmere, an anxious, and perplexed little man, sadly hard up, and simple-minded enough to say so; which amuses everybody immensely.

"He's pathetically original; plebeian on his mother's side; very good-natured; nothing at all of a sportsman; and painfully short of both intellect and cash—a funny, harmless, distracted little man who runs about asking everybody the best and quickest methods of amassing a comfortable fortune in America. And I must say that people have jollied him rather cruelly.

"The Sarnoffs on the other hand are modest and nice people—the Prince is a yellow, dried-up Asiatic who is making a collection of parasites—a shrewd, kindly, and clever little scientist. His wife is a charming girl, intellectual but deliciously feminine. She was

Cynthia Challis before her marriage, and always a most attractive and engaging personality. They dined with us at the Legation on Thursday.

" Afterward there was a dance at Mrs. Sprowl's. I led from one end, Lester Caldera from the other. One or two newspapers criticised the decorations and favours as vulgarly expensive; spoke of a 'monkey figure'—purely imaginary—which they said I introduced into the cotillion, and that the favours were marmosets!—who probably were the intellectual peers of anybody present.

" The old lady is in a terrific temper. I'm afraid some poor scribblers are going to catch it. I thought it very funny.

" Speaking of scribblers and temper reminds me that Karl Westguard's new book is stirring up a toy tempest. He has succeeded in offending a dozen people who pretend to recognise themselves or their relatives among the various characters. I don't know whether the novel is really any good, or not. We, who know Karl so intimately, find it hard to realise that perhaps he may be a writer of some importance.

" There appears to be considerable excitement about this new book. People seem inclined to discuss it at dinners; Karl's publishers are delighted. Karl, on the contrary, is not at all flattered by the kind of a success that menaces him. He is mad all through, but not as mad as his redoubtable aunt, who tells everybody that he's a scribbling lunatic who doesn't know what he's writing, and that she washes her fat and gem-laden hands of him henceforth.

" Poor Karl! He's already thirty-seven; he's written fifteen books, no one of which, he tells me, ever before

stirred up anybody's interest. But this newest novel, 'The Real Thing,' has already gone into three editions in two weeks—whatever that actually means—and still the re-orders are pouring in, and his publishers are madly booming it, and several indignant people are threatening Karl with the law of libel, and Karl is partly furious, partly amused, and entirely astonished at the whole affair.

"Because you see, the people who think they recognise portraits of themselves or their friends in several of the unattractive characters in the story—are as usual, in error. Karl's people are always purely and synthetically composite. Besides everybody who knows Karl Westguard ought to know that he's too decent a fellow, and too good a workman to use models stupidly. Anybody can copy; anybody can reproduce the obvious. Even photographers are artists in these days. Good work is a synthesis founded on truth, and carried logically to a conclusion.

"But it's useless to try to convince the Philistines. Once possessed with the idea that they or their friends are 'meant,' as they say, Archimedes's lever could not pry them loose from their agreeably painful obsession.

"Then there are other sorts of humans who are already bothering Karl. This species recognise in every 'hero' or 'heroine' a minute mental and physical analysis of themselves and their own particular, specific, and petty emotions. Proud, happy, flattered, they permit nobody to mistake the supposed tribute which they are entirely self-persuaded that the novelist has offered to them.

"And these phases of 'The Real Thing' are fretting and mortifying Karl to the verge of distraction. He

awakes to find himself not famous but notorious—not criticised for his workmanship, good or bad, but gabbled about because some ludicrous old Uncle Foozle pretends to discover a similarity between Karl's episodes and characters and certain doings of which Uncle F. is personally cognisant.

"The great resource of stupidity is and has always been the anagram; and as stupidity is almost invariably suspicious, the hunt for hidden meanings preoccupies the majority of mankind.

"Because I have ventured to send you Karl's new book is no reason why I also should have presumed to write you a treatise in several volumes.

"But I miss you, oddly enough—miss everything I never had of you—your opinions on what interests us both; the delightful discussions of things important, which have never taken place between us. It's odd, isn't it, Mrs. Leeds, that I miss, long for, and even remember so much that has never been?

"Molly Wycherly wrote to Mrs. Lannis that you were having a gay time in Florida; that Sir Charles Mallison had joined your party; that you'd had luncheons and dinners given you at the Club, at the Inlet, at the Wiers's place, 'Coquina Castle'; and that Jim and Sir Charles had bravely slain many ducks. Which is certainly glory enough to go round. In a friendly little note to me you were good enough to ask what I am doing, and to emphasise your request for an answer by underlining your request.

"Proud and flattered by your generous interest I hasten to inform you that I am leading the same useful, serious, profitable, purposeful, ambitious, and en-

nobling life which I was leading when I first met you. Such a laudable existence makes for one's self-respect; and, happy in that consciousness, undisturbed by journalistic accusations concerning marmosets and vulgarity, I concentrate my entire intellectual efforts upon keeping my job, which is to remain deaf, dumb, and blind, and at the same time be ornamental, resourceful, good-tempered, and amusing to those who are not invariably all of these things at the same time.

"Is it too much to expect another note from you?

"Sincerely yours,

"Richard Stanley Quarren."

She answered him on the fourth week of her absence.

"My dear Mr. Quarren:

"Your letter interested me, but there was all through it an undertone of cynicism which rang false—almost a dissonance to an ear which has heard you strike a truer chord.

"I do not like what you say of yourself, or of your life. I have talked very seriously with Molly, who adores you; and she evidently thinks you capable of achieving anything you care to undertake. Which is my own opinion—based on twenty-four hours of acquaintance.

"I have read Mr. Westguard's novel. Everybody here is reading it. I'd like to talk to you about it, some day. Mr. Westguard's intense bitterness confuses me a little, and seems almost to paralyse any critical judgment I may possess. A crusade in fiction has always seemed to me but a sterile effort. To do a thing is fine;

to talk about it in fiction a far less admirable performance—like the small boy, safe in the window, who defies his enemy with out-thrust tongue.

"When I was young—a somewhat lonely child, with only a very few books to companion me—I pored over Carlyle's 'French Revolution,' and hated Philip Egalité. But that youthful hatred was a little modified because Egalité did actually become personally active. If he had only talked, my hatred would have become contempt for a renegade who did not possess the courage of his convictions. But he voted death to his own caste, facing the tribunal. He talked, but he also acted.

"I do not mean this as a parallel between Mr. Westguard and the sanguinary French iconoclast. Mr. Westguard, also, has the courage of his convictions; he lives, I understand, the life which he considers a proper one. It is the life which he preaches in 'The Real Thing'—a somewhat solemn, self-respecting, self-supporting existence, devoted to self-development; a life of upright thinking, and the fulfilment of duty, civil and religious, incident to dignified citizenship. Such a life may be a blameless one; I don't know.

"Also it might even be admirable within its limits if Mr. Westguard did not also appoint himself critic, disciplinarian, and prophet of that particular section of society into which accident of birth has dumped him.

"Probably there is no section of human society that does not need a wholesome scourging now and then, but somehow, it seems to me, that it could be done less bitterly and with better grace than Mr. Westguard does it in his book. The lash, swung from within, and applied with judgment and discrimination, ought to do a more thorough and convincing piece of work than a

knout allied with the clubs of the proletariat, hitting at every head in sight.

"Let the prophets and sybils, the augurs and oracles of the *Hoi polloi* address themselves to them; and let ours talk to us, not *about* us to the world at large.

"A renegade from either side makes an unholy alliance, and, with his first shout from the public pulpit, tightens the master knot which he is trying to untie to the glory of God and for the sake of peace and good will on earth. And the result is Donnybrook Fair.

"I hate to speak this way to you of your friend, and about a man I like and, in a measure, really respect. But this is what I think. And my inclination is to tell you the truth, always.

"Concerning the artistic value of Mr. Westguard's literary performance, I know little. The simplicity of his language recommends the pages to me. The book is easy to read. Perhaps therein lies his art; I do not know.

"Now, as I am in an unaccountably serious mood amid all the frivolity of this semi-tropical place, may I not say to you something about yourself? How are you going to silence me?

"Well, then; you seem to reason illogically. You make little of yourself, yet you offer me your friendship, by implication, every time you write to me. You seek my society mentally. Do you really believe that my mind is so easily satisfied with intellectual rubbish, or that I am flattered by letters from a nobody?

"What do you suppose there is attractive about you, Mr. Quarren—if you really do amount to as little as you pretend? I've seen handsomer men, monsieur,

wealthier men, more intelligent men; men more experienced, men of far greater talents and attainments.

"Why do you suppose that I sit here in the Southern sunshine writing to you when there are dozens of men perfectly ready to amuse me?—and qualified to do it, too!

"For the sake of your *beaux-yeux? Non pas!*

"But there is a *something* which the world recognises as a subtle and nameless sympathy. And it stretches an invisible filament between you and the girl who is writing to you.

"That tie is not founded on sentiment; I think you know that. And, of things spiritual, you and I have never yet spoken.

"Therefore I conclude that the tie must be purely intellectual; that mind calls to mind and finds contentment in the far response.

"So, when you pretend to me that you are of no intellectual account, you pay me a scurvy compliment. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

"With this gentle reproof I seal my long, long letter, and go where the jasmine twineth and the orchestra playeth; for it is tea-time, my friend, and the Park of Peacocks is all a-glitter with plumage. Soft eyes look wealth to eyes that ask again; and all is brazen as a dinner bell!

"O friend! do you know that since I have been here I might have attained to fortune, had I cared to select any one of several generous gentlemen who have been good enough to thrust that commodity at me?

"To be asked to marry a man no longer distresses me. I am all over the romantic idea of being sorry for wealthy amateurs who make me a plain business propo-

sition, offering to invest a fortune in my good looks. To amateurs, connoisseurs, and collectors, there is no such thing as a fixed market value to anything. An object of art is worth what it can be bought for. I don't yet know how much I am worth. I may yet find out.

"There are nice men here, odious men, harmless men, colourless men, worthy men, and the ever-present fool. He is really the happiest, I suppose.

"Then, all in a class by himself, is an Englishman, one Sir Charles Mallison. I don't know what to tell you about him except that I feel exceedingly safe and comfortable when I am with him.

"He says very little; I say even less. But it is agreeable to be with him.

"He is middle-aged, and, I imagine, very wise. Perhaps his reticence makes me think so. He and Mr. Wycherly shoot ducks on the lagoon—and politics into each other.

"I must go. You are not here to persuade me to stay and talk nonsense to you against my better judgment. You're quite helpless, you see. So I'm off.

"Will you write to me again?

"Strelsa Leeds."

A week after Quarren had answered her letter O'Hara called his attention to a paragraph in a morning paper which hinted at an engagement between Sir Charles Mallison and Mrs. Leeds.

Next day's paper denied it on excellent authority; so, naturally, the world at large believed the contrary.

Southern news also revealed the interesting item that the yacht, *Yulan*, belonging to Mrs. Sprowl's hatchet-faced nephew, Langly Sprowl, had sailed from

Miami for the West Indies with the owner and Mrs. Leeds and Sir Charles Mallison among the guests.

The *Yulan* had not as fragrant a reputation as its exotic name might signify, respectable parties being in the minority aboard her, but Langly Sprowl was Langly Sprowl, and few people declined any invitation of his.

He was rather a remarkable young man, thin as a blade, with a voracious appetite and no morals. Nor did he care whether anybody else had any. What he wanted he went after with a cold and unsensitive directness that no newspapers had been courageous enough to characterise. He wouldn't have cared if they had.

Among other things that he had wanted, recently, was another man's wife. The other man being of his own caste made no difference to him; he simply forced him to let his wife divorce him; which, it was understood, that pretty young matron was now doing as rapidly as the laws of Nevada allowed.

Meanwhile Langly Sprowl had met Strelsa Leeds.

The sailing of the *Yulan* for the West Indies became the topic of dinner and dance gossip; and Quarren heard every interpretation that curiosity and malice could put upon the episode.

He had been feeling rather cheerful that day; a misguided man from Jersey City had suddenly developed a mania for a country home. Quarren personally conducted him all over Tappan-Zee Park on the Hudson, through mud and slush in a skidding touring car, with the result that the man had become a pioneer and had promised to purchase a building site.

So Quarren came back to the Legation that after-

"'I write,' said Westguard, furious, 'because I have a message to deliv—'"

noon feeling almost buoyant, and discovered Westguard in all kinds of temper, smoking a huge faïence pipe which he always did when angry, and which had become known as "The Weather-breeder."

"Jetzt geht das Wetter los!" quoted Quarren, dropping into a seat by the fire. "Where is this particular area of low depression centred, Karl?"

"Over my damn book. The papers insist it's a *livre-à-clef;* and I am certain the thing is selling on that account! I tell you it's humiliating. I've done my best as honestly as I know how, and not one critic even mentions the philosophy of the thing; all they notice is the mere story and the supposed resemblance between my characters and living people! I'm cursed if I ever——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Quarren tranquilly. "If you're a novelist you write to amuse people, and you ought to be thankful that you've succeeded."

"Confound it!" roared Westguard, "I write to *instruct* people! not to keep 'em from yawning!"

"Then you've made a jolly fluke of it, that's all—because you have accidentally written a corking good story—good enough and interesting enough to make people stand for the cold chunks of philosophical admonition with which you've spread your sandwich—thinly, Heaven be praised!"

"I write," said Westguard, furious, "because I've a message to deliv——"

"Help!" moaned Quarren. "You write because it's in you to do it; because you've nothing more interesting to do; and because it enables you to make a decent and honourable living!"

"Do those reasons prevent my having a message to deliver?" roared Westguard.

"No, they exist in spite of it. You'd write anyway, whether or not you believed you had a message to deliver. You've written some fifteen novels, and fifteen times you have smothered your story with your message. This time, by accident, the story got its second breath, and romped home, with 'Message' a bad second, and that selling plater, 'Philosophy,' left at the post——"

"Go on!—you irreverent tout!" growled Westguard; "I want my novels read, of course. Any author does. But I wish to Heaven somebody would try to interpret the important lessons which I——"

"Oh, preciousness and splash! Tell your story as well as you can, and if it's well done there'll be latent lessons enough in it."

"Are you perhaps instructing me in my own profession?" asked the other, smiling.

"Heaven knows I'm not venturing——"

"Heaven knows you *are!* Also there is something in what you say—" He sat smoking, thoughtfully, eyes narrowing in the fire—"if I only *could* manage that!—to arrest the public's attention by the rather cheap medium of the story, and then, cleverly, shoot a few moral pills into 'em. . . . That's one way, of course——"

"Like the drums of the Salvation Army."

Westguard looked around at him, suspiciously, but Quarren seemed to be serious enough.

"I suppose it doesn't matter much how a fellow collects an audience, so that he does collect one."

"Exactly," nodded Quarren. "Get your people, then keep 'em interested and unsuspecting while you inject 'em full of thinks."

Westguard smoked and pondered; but presently his lips became stern and compressed.

"I don't intend to trifle with my convictions or make any truce or any compromise with 'em," he announced. "I'm afraid that this last story of mine ran away with me."

"It sure did, old Ironsides. Heaven protected her own this time. And in 'The Real Thing' you have ridden farther out among the people with your Bible and your Sword than you ever have penetrated by brandishing both from the immemorial but immobile battlements of righteousness. Truth *is* a citadel, old fellow; but its garrison should be raiders, not defenders. And they should ride far afield to carry its message. For few journey to that far citadel; you must go to them. And does it make any difference what vehicle you employ in the cause of Truth—so that the message arrives somewhere before your vehicle breaks down of its own heaviness? Novel or poem, sermon or holy writ—it's all one, Karl, so that they get there with their burden."

Westguard sat silent a moment, then thumped the table, emphatically.

"If I had your wasted talents," he said, "I could write anything!"

"Rot!"

"As you please. You use your ability rottenly—that's true enough."

"My ability," mimicked Quarren.

"Yes, your many, many talents, Rix. God knows why He gave them to you; I don't—for you use them ignobly, when you do not utterly neglect them——"

"I've a light and superficial talent for entertaining

people; I've nimble legs, and possess a low order of intelligence known as 'tact.' What more have I?"

"You're the best amateur actor in New York, for example."

"An *amateur*," sneered Quarren. "That is to say, a man who has the inclinations, but neither the courage, the self-respect, nor the ambition of the professional. . . . Well, I admit that. I lack something—courage, I think. I prefer what is easy. And I'm doing it."

"What's your reward?" said Westguard bluntly.

"Reward? Oh, I don't know. The inner temple. I have the run of the premises. People like me, trust me, depend upon me more or less. The intrigues and politics of my little world amuse me; now and then I act as ambassador, as envoy of peace, as herald, as secret diplomatic agent. . . . Reward? Oh, yes—you didn't suppose that my real-estate operations clothed and fed me, did you, Karl?"

"What does?"

"Diplomacy," explained Quarren gaily. "A successful embassy is rewarded. How? Why, now and then a pretty woman's husband makes an investment for me at his own risk; now and then, when my office is successfully accomplished, I have my fee as social attorney or arbiter elegantiarum. . . . There are, perhaps, fewer separations and divorces on account of me; fewer scandals.

"I am sometimes called into consultation, *in extremis;* I listen, I advise—sometimes I plan and execute; even take the initiative and interfere—as when a foolish boy at the Cataract Club, last week, locked himself into the bath-room with an automatic revolver and a case of half-drunken fright. I had to be very careful;

I expected to hear that drumming fusillade at any moment.

"But I talked to him, through the keyhole: and at last he opened the door—to take a shot at me, first."

Quarren shrugged and lighted a cigarette.

"Of course," he added, "his father was only too glad to pay his debts. But boys don't always see things in their true proportions. Neither do women."

Westguard, silent, scowling, pulled at his pipe for a while, then:

"Why should you play surgeon and nurse in such a loathsome hospital?"

"Somebody must. I seem better fitted to do it than the next man."

"Yes," said Westguard with a wry face, "I fancy somebody must do unpleasant things—even among the lepers of Molokai. But I'd prefer real lepers."

"The social sort are sometimes sicker," laughed Quarren.

"I don't agree with you. . . . By the way, it's all off between my aunt and me."

"I'm sorry, Karl——"

"I'm not! I don't want her money. She told me to go to the devil, and I said something similar. Do you know what she wants me to do?" he added angrily. "Give up writing, live on an allowance from her, and marry Chrysos Lacy! What do you think of that for a cold-blooded and impertinent proposition! We had a fearful family row," he continued with satisfaction—"my aunt bellowing so that her footmen actually fled, and I doing the cool and haughty, and letting her bellow her bally head off."

"You and she have exchanged civilities before," said Quarren, smiling.

"Yes, but this is really serious. I'm damned if I give up writing."

"Or marry Chrysos Lacy?"

"Or that, either. Do you think I want a red-headed wife? And I've never spoken a dozen words to her, either. And I'll pick out my own wife. What does my aunt think I am? I wish I were in love with somebody's parlour-maid. B'jinks! I'd marry her, just to see my aunt's expression——"

"Oh, stop your fulminations," said Quarren, laughing. "That's the way with you artistic people; you're a passionate pack of pups!"

"I'm not as passionate as my aunt!" retorted Westguard wrathfully. "Do you consider her artistic? She's a meddlesome, malicious, domineering, insolent, evil old woman, and I told her so."

Quarren managed to stifle his laughter for a moment, but his sense of the ludicrous was keen, and the scene his fancy evoked sent him off into mirth uncontrollable.

Westguard eyed him gloomily; ominous clouds poured from "The Weather-breeder."

"Perhaps it's funny," he said, "but she and I cannot stand each other, and this time it's all off for keeps. I told her if she sent me another check I'd send it back. That settles it, doesn't it?"

"You're foolish, Karl——"

"Never mind. If I can't keep myself alive in an untrammelled and self-respecting exercise of my profession—" His voice ended in a gurgling growl. Then, as though the recollections of his injuries at the hands of his aunt still stung him, he reared up in his chair:

"Chrysos Lacy," he roared, "is a sweet, innocent girl—not a bale of fashionable merchandise! Besides," he added in a modified tone, "I was rather taken by—by Mrs. Leeds."

Quarren slowly raised his eyes.

"I was," insisted Westguard sulkily; "and I proved myself an ass by saying so to my aunt. Why in Heaven's name I was idiot enough to go and tell her, I don't know. Perhaps I had a vague idea that she would be so delighted that she'd give me several tons of helpful advice."

"Did she?"

"*Did* she! She came back at me with Chrysos Lacy, I tell you! And when I merely smiled and attempted to waive away the suggestion, she flew into a passion, called me down, cursed me out—you know her language isn't always in good taste—and then she ordered me to keep away from Mrs. Leeds—as though I ever hung around any woman's skirts! I'm no Squire of Dames. I tell you, Rix, I was mad clear through. So I told her that I'd marry Mrs. Leeds the first chance I got——"

"Don't talk about her that way," remonstrated Quarren pleasantly.

"About who? My aunt?"

"I didn't mean your aunt?"

"Oh. About Mrs. Leeds. Why not? She's the most attractive woman I ever met——"

"Very well. But don't talk about marrying her—as though you had merely to suggest it to her. You know, after all, Mrs. Leeds may have ideas of her own."

"Probably she has," admitted Westguard, sulkily. "I don't imagine she'd care for a man of my sort. Why

do you suppose she went off on that cruise with Langly Sprowl? "

Quarren said, gravely: " I have no idea what reasons Mrs. Leeds has for doing anything."

" You correspond."

" Who said so? "

" My aunt."

Quarren flushed up, but said nothing.

Westguard, oblivious of his annoyance, and enveloped in a spreading cloud of tobacco, went on:

" Of course if *you* don't know, *I* don't. But, by the same token, my aunt was in a towering rage when she heard that Langly had Mrs. Leeds aboard the *Yulan*."

" What! " said the other, sharply.

" She swore like a trooper, and called Langly all kinds of impolite names. Said she'd trim him if he ever tried any of his tricks around Mrs. Leeds——"

" What tricks? What does she mean by tricks? "

" Oh, I suppose she meant any of his blackguardly philandering. There isn't a woman living on whom he is afraid to try his hatchet-faced blandishments."

Quarren dropped back into the depths of his armchair. Presently his rigid muscles relaxed. He said coolly:

" I don't think Langly Sprowl is likely to misunderstand Mrs. Leeds."

" That depends," said Westguard. " He's a rotten specimen, even if he is my cousin. And he knows I think so."

A few minutes later O'Hara sauntered in. He had been riding in the Park and his boots and spurs were shockingly muddy.

"Who is this Sir Charles Mallison, anyway?" he asked, using the decanter and then squirting his glass full of carbonic. "Is it true that he's goin' to marry that charmin' Mrs. Leeds? I'll break his bally Sassenach head for him! I'll——"

"The rumour was contradicted in this morning's paper," said Quarren coldly.

O'Hara drank pensively: "I see that Langly Sprowl is messin' about, too. Mrs. Ledwith had better hurry up out there in Reno—or wherever she's gettin' her divorce. I saw Chet Ledwith ridin' in the Park. Dankmere was with him. Funny he doesn't seem to lose any caste by sellin' his wife to Sprowl."

"The whole thing is a filthy mess," growled Westguard; "let it alone."

"Why don't you make a novel about it?" inquired O'Hara.

"Because, you dub! I don't use real episodes or living people!" roared Westguard; "newspapers and a few chumps to the contrary!"

"So!—so-o!" said O'Hara, soothingly—"whoa—steady, boy!" And he pretended to rub down Westguard, hissing the while as do grooms when currying.

"Anybody who tells the truth about social conditions in any section of human society is always regarded as a liar," said Westguard. "Not that I have any desire to do it, but if I *should* ever write a novel dealing with social conditions in any fashionable set, I'd be disbelieved."

"You would be if you devoted your attention to fashionable scandals only," said Quarren.

"Why? Aren't there plenty of scandalous——"

"Plenty. But no more than in any other set or coterie; not as many as there are among more ignorant people. Virtue far outbalances vice among us: a novel, properly proportioned, ought to show that. If it doesn't, it's misleading."

"Supposing," said Westguard, "that I were indecent enough to show up my aunt in fiction. Nobody would believe her possible."

"I sometimes doubt her even now," observed O'Hara, grinning.

Quarren said: "Count up the unpleasant characters in your own social vicinity, Karl—just to prove to yourself that there are really very few."

"There is Langly—and my aunt—and the Lester Calderas—and the Ledwiths——"

"Go on!"

Westguard laughed: "I guess that ends the list," he said.

"It does. Also I dispute the list," said Quarren.

"Cyrille Caldera is a pippin," remarked O'Hara, sentimentally.

"What about Mary Ledwith? Is anybody here inclined to sit in judgment?"

"I," said Westguard grimly.

"Why?"

"Divorce is a dirty business."

"Oh. You'd rather she put up with Chester?—the sort of man who was weak enough to let her go?"

"Yes!"

"Get out, you old Roundhead!" said Quarren, laughing. He rose, laid his hand lightly on Westguard's shoulder in passing, and went upstairs to his room, where he wrote a long letter to Strelsa; and then

destroyed it. Then he lay down, covering his boyish head with his arms.

When Lacy came in he saw him lying on the bed, and thought he was asleep.

CHAPTER V

Toward the end of March Strelsa, with the Wycherlys, returned to New York, dead tired. She had been flattered, run after, courted from Palm Beach to Havana; the perpetual social activity, the unbroken fever of change and excitement had already made firmer the soft lineaments of the girl's features, had slightly altered the expression of the mouth.

By daylight the fatigues of pleasure were faintly visible—that unmistakable imprint which may perhaps leave the eyes clear and calm, but which edges the hardened contour of the cheek under them with deeper violet shadow.

Not that hers was as yet the battered beauty of exhaustion; she had merely lived every minute to the full all winter long, and had overtaxed her capacity; and the fire had consumed something of her freshness.

Not yet inured, not yet crystallised to that experienced hardness which withstands the fierce flame of living too fast in a world where every minute is demanded and where sleep becomes a forgotten art, the girl was completely tired out, and while she herself did not realise it, her features showed it.

But nervous exhaustion alone could not account for the subtle change in her expression. Eyes and lips were still sweet, even in repose, but there was now a jaded charm about them—something unspoiled had dis-

appeared from them—something of that fearlessness which vanishes after too close and too constant contact with the world of men.

Evidently her mind was quite as weary as her body, though even to herself she had not admitted fatigue; and a tired mind no longer defends itself. Hers had not; and the defence had been, day by day, imperceptibly weakening. So that things to which once she had been able at will to close her mind, and, mentally deaf, let pass unheard, she had heard, and had even thought about. And the effort to defend her ears and mind became less vigorous, less instinctive—partly through sheer weariness.

The wisdom of woman and of man, and of what is called the world, the girl was now learning—unconsciously in the beginning and then with a kind of shamed indifference—but the creation of an artificial interest in anything is a subtle matter; and the ceaseless repetition of things unworthy at last awake that ignoble curiosity always latent in man. Because intelligence was born with it; and unwearied intelligence alone completely suppresses it.

At first she had kept her head fairly level in the whirlwind of adulation. To glimpses of laxity she closed her eyes. Sir Charles was always refreshing to her; but she could see little more of him than of other men—less than she saw of Langly Sprowl, however that happened—and it probably happened through the cleverness of Langly Sprowl.

Again and again she found herself with him separated from the others—sometimes alone with him on deck—and never quite understood how it came about so constantly.

As for Sprowl he made love to her from the first; and he was a trim, carefully groomed and volubly animated young man, full of information, and with a restless, ceaseless range of intelligence which at first dazzled with its false brilliancy.

But it was only a kind of flash-light intelligence. It seemed to miss, occasionally; some cog, some screw somewhere was either absent or badly adjusted or overstrained.

At first Strelsa found the young fellow fascinating. He had been everywhere and had seen everything; his mind was kaleidoscopic; his thought shifted, flashed, jerked, leaped like erratic lightning from one subject to another—from Japanese aeroplanes to a scheme for filling in the East River; from a plan to reconcile church and state in France to an idea for indefinitely prolonging human life. He had written several books about all kinds of things. Nobody read them.

The first time he spoke to her of love was on a magnificent star-set night off Martinique; and she coolly reminded him of the gossip connecting him with a pretty woman in Reno. She could not have done it a month ago.

He denied it so pleasantly, so frankly, that, astonished, she could scarcely choose but believe him.

After that he made ardent, headlong love to her at every opportunity, with a flighty recklessness which began by amusing her. At first, also, she found wholesome laughter a good defence; but there was an undercurrent of intelligent, relentless vigour in his attack which presently sobered her. And she vaguely realised that he was a man who knew what he wanted. A talk with Molly Wycherly sobered her still more; and she

avoided him as politely as she could. But, being her host, it was impossible to keep clear of him. Besides there was about him a certain unwholesome fascination, even for her. No matter how bad a man's record may be, few women doubt their ability to make it a better one.

"You little goose," said Molly Wycherly, "everybody knows the kind of man he is. Could anything be more brazen than his attentions to you while Mary Ledwith is in Reno?"

"He says that her being there has nothing to do with him."

"Then he lies," said Molly, shrugging her shoulders.

"He doesn't speak as though he were trying to deceive anybody, Molly. He is perfectly frank to me. I can't believe that scandal. Besides he is quite open and manly about his unsavoury reputation; makes no excuses; simply says that there's good in every man, and that there is always one woman in the world who can bring it out——"

"Oh, mushy! What an out-of-date whine! He's bad all through I tell you——"

"No man is!" insisted Strelsa.

"What?"

"No man is. The great masters of fiction always ascribe at least one virtue to their most infamous creations——"

"Oh, Strelsa, you talk like a pan of fudge! *I* tell you that Langly Sprowl is no good at all. I hope you won't have to marry him to find out."

"I don't intend to. . . . How inconsistent you are, Molly. You—and everybody else—believe him to be the most magnificent match in——"

"If position and wealth is all you care for, yes. I didn't suppose you'd come to that."

Strelsa said candidly: "I care for both—I don't know how much."

"As much as that?"

"No; not enough to marry him. And if he is what you say, it's hopeless of course. . . . I don't think he is. Be decent, Molly; everybody is very horrid about him, and—and that is always a matter of sympathetic interest to a generous woman. When the whole world condemns a man it makes him interesting!"

"That's a piffling and emotional thing to say! He may be attractive in an uncanny way, because he's agreeable to look at, amusing, and very dangerous — a perfectly cold-blooded, and I think, slightly unbalanced social marauder. And that's the fact about Langly Sprowl. And I wish we were on land, the *Yulan* and her owner in—well, in the Erie Basin, perhaps."

Whether or not Strelsa believed these things, there still remained in her that curious sense of fascination in Sprowl's presence, partly arising, no doubt, from an instinctive sympathy for a young man so universally damned; partly, because she thought that perhaps he really was damned. Therefore, deep in her heart she felt that he must be dangerous; and there is, in that one belief, every element of unwholesome fascination. And a mind fatigued is no longer wholesome.

Then, too, there was always Sir Charles Mallison to turn to for a refreshing moral bath. Safety of soul lay in his vicinity; she felt confidence in the world wherever he traversed it. With him she relaxed and rested; there was repose for her in his silences; strength

for her when he spoke; and a serene comradeship which no hint of sentiment had ever vexed.

Perhaps only a few people realised how thoroughly a single winter was equipping Strelsa for the part she seemed destined to play in that narrow world with which she was already identified; and few realised how fast she was learning. Laxity of precept, easy morals, looseness of thought, idle and good-natured acquiescence in social conditions where all standards seemed alike, all ideals merely a matter of personal taste—this was the atmosphere into which she had stepped from two years of Western solitude after a nightmare of violence, cruelty, and depravity unutterable. And naturally it seemed heavenly to her; and each revelation inconsistent with her own fastidious instincts left her less and less surprised, less and less uneasy. And after a while she began to assimilate all that she saw and heard.

A few unworldly instincts remained in her—gratitude for and quick response to any kindness offered from anybody; an inclination to make friends with stray wanderers into her circle, and to cultivate the socially useless.

Taking four o'clock tea alone with Mrs. Sprowl the afternoon of her return to town—an honour vouchsafed to few—Strelsa was relating, at that masterful woman's request, her various exotic experiences. Mrs. Sprowl had commanded her attendance early. There were reasons. And now partly vexed, partly in unwilling admiration, the old lady sat smiling and all the while thinking to herself impatiently; "Baby! Fool! Little ninny! Imbecile!" while she listened, fat bejewelled hands folded, small green eyes shining in the expanse of powdered and painted fat.

After a while she could endure it no longer, and she said with a wheeze of good-natured disdain:

"It's like a school-girl's diary—all those rhapsodies over volcanoes, palm trees, and the colour of the Spanish Main. Never mind geography, child; tell me about the men!"

"Men?" repeated Strelsa, laughingly—"why there were shoals and shoals of them, of every description!"

"I mean the *one* man?" insisted Mrs. Sprowl encouragingly.

"Which, please?"

"Nonsense! There *was* one, I suppose."

"Oh, I don't think so. . . . Your nephew, Langly, was exceedingly amiable——"

"He's a plain beast," said his aunt, bluntly. "I didn't mean him."

"He was very civil to me," insisted Strelsa, colouring.

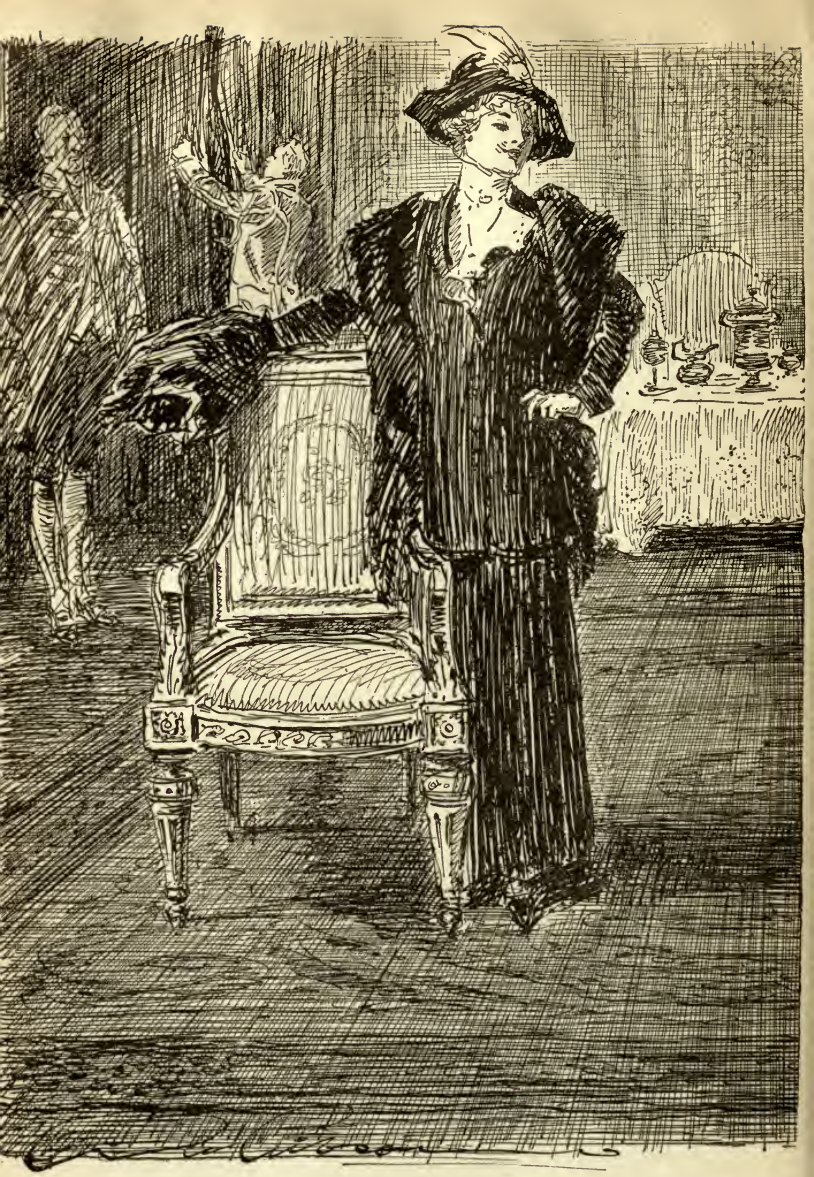
"Probably he didn't have a chance to be otherwise. He's a rotter, child. Ask anybody. I know perfectly well what he's been up to. I'm sorry you went on the *Yulan*. He had no business to ask you—or any other nice girl—or anybody at all until that Reno scandal is officially made respectable. If it were not for his money—" She stopped a moment, adding cynically—"and if it were not for mine—certain people wouldn't be tolerated anywhere, I suppose. . . . How did you like Sir Charles?"

"Oh, he is charming!" she said warmly.

"You like him?"

"I almost adore him."

"Why not adore him entirely?"



"'Never mind geography, child;

tell me about the men!'"

Strelsa laughed frankly: "He hasn't asked me to, for one reason. Besides——"

"No doubt he'll do it."

The girl shook her head, still smiling:

"You don't understand at all. There isn't the slightest sentiment between us. He's only thoroughly nice and agreeable, and he and I are most companionable. I hope nobody will be silly enough to hint anything of that sort to him. It would embarrass him dreadfully."

Mrs. Sprowl's smile was blandly tolerant:

"The man's in love with you. Didn't you know it?"

"But you are mistaken, dear Mrs. Sprowl. If it were true I would know it, I think."

"Nonsense! He told me so."

"Oh," said Strelsa in amazed consternation. She added: "If it *is* so I'd rather not speak of it, please."

Mrs. Sprowl eyed her with shifty but keen intelligence. "Little idiot," she thought; but her smile remained bland and calmly patronising.

For a second or two longer she studied the girl cautiously, trying to make up her mind whether there was really any character in Strelsa's soft beauty—anything firmer than material fastidiousness; anything more real than a natural and dainty reticence. Mrs. Sprowl could ride rough-shod over such details. But she was too wise to ride if there was any chance of a check from higher sources.

"If you married him it would be very gratifying to me," she said pleasantly. "Come; let's discuss the matter like sensible women. Shall we?"

Many people would not have disregarded such a

wish. Strelsa flushed and lifted her purple-gray eyes to meet the little green ones scanning her slyly.

"I am sorry," she said, "but I couldn't discuss such a thing, you see. Don't you see I can't, dear Mrs. Sprowl?"

"Pooh! Rubbish! Anybody can discuss anything," rejoined the old lady with impersonal and boisterous informality. "I'm fond of you. Everybody knows it. I'm fond of Sir Charles. He's a fine figure of a man. You match him in everything, except wealth. It's an ideal marriage——"

"Please don't!—I simply cannot——"

"Ideal," repeated Mrs. Sprowl loudly—"an ideal marriage——"

"But when there is no love——"

"Plenty! Loads of it! He's mad about you—crazy!——"

"I—meant—on my part——"

"Good God!" shouted the old lady, beating the air with pudgy hands—"isn't it luck enough to have love on one side? What does the present generation want! I tell you it's ideal, perfect. He's a good man as men go, and a devilish handsome——"

"I know—but——"

"And he's got money!" shouted the old lady—"plenty of it I tell you! And he has the entrée everywhere on the Continent—in England—everywhere!—which Dankmere has not!—if you're considering that little whelp!"

Stunned, shrinking from the dreadful asthmatic noises in Mrs. Sprowl's voice, Strelsa sat dumb, wincing under the blows of sound, not knowing how to escape.

"I'm fond of you!" shrieked the old lady—"I can

be of use to you and I want to be. That's why I asked you to tea! I want to make you happy—and Sir Charles, too! What the devil do you suppose there is in it for me except to oblige hi—you both?"

"Th-thank you, but——"

"I'll bet a shilling that Molly Wycherly let you go about with any little spindle-shanked pill who came hanging around!—And I told her what were my wishes——"

"Please—oh, *please*, Mrs. Sprowl——"

"Yes, I did! It's a good match! I want you to consider it!—I insist that——"

"Mrs. Sprowl!" exclaimed Strelsa, pink with confusion and resentment, "I am obliged to you for the interest you display, but it is a matter——"

"What!"

"I am really—grateful—but——"

"Answer me, child. Has that cursed nephew of mine made any impression on you? Answer me!"

"Not the kind you evidently mean!" said Strelsa, helplessly.

"Is there anybody else?"

The outrageous question silenced the girl for a moment. Angry, she still tried to be gentle; tried to remember the age, and the excellent intentions of this excited old lady; and she answered in a low voice:

"I care for no man in particular, unless it be Sir Charles—and——"

"And who?"

"Mr. Quarren, I think," she said.

Mrs. Sprowl's jowl grew purple with fury:

"You—has that boy had the impudence—damn him——"

Strelsa sprang to her feet.

"I really cannot remain—" she said with decision, but the old lady only bawled:

"Sit down! Sit down!"

"I will not!"

"Sit *down!*" she roared in a passion. "What the devil——"

Strelsa, a little pale, started to pass her—then halted, astounded: for the old lady had burst into a passion of choking gasps. Whether the terrible sounds she made were due to impotent rage or asthma, Strelsa, confused, shocked, embarrassed, but still angry, had no notion; and while Mrs. Sprowl coughed fatly, she stood still, catching muffled fragments of reproaches directed at people who flouted friendship; who had no consideration for age, and no gratitude, no tenderness, no pity.

"I—I *am* grateful," faltered Strelsa, "only I cannot——"

"I wanted to be a mother to you! I've tried to be," wheezed the old lady in a fresh paroxysm; and beat the air.

For one swift instant the girl remembered what her real mother had been to her; and her heart hardened.

"I care only for your friendship, Mrs. Sprowl; I do not wish you to do anything for me; can we not be friends on that basis?"

Mrs. Sprowl swabbed her inflamed eyes and peered around the corner of the handkerchief.

"Come here, my dear," she said.

Strelsa went, slowly; and Mrs. Sprowl enveloped her like a fleshy squid, panting.

"I only wanted to be good to you, Strelsa. I'm just an old fool I suppose——"

"Oh, please don't——"

"That's all I am, child, just a sentimental old fool. The poor man's adoration of you touched my heart—and you do like him a little, don't you?"

"Very much. . . . Thank you for—for wishing happiness to me. I really don't mean to be ungrateful; I have a horror of ingratitude. It's only that—the idea never occurred to me; and I am incapable of doing such a thing for material reasons, unless—I also really cared for a man——"

"Of course, child. Maybe you will care for him some day. I won't interfere any more. . . . Only—don't lose your heart to any of these young jackals fawning around your skirts. Every set is full of 'em. They're nothing but the capering chorus in this comic opera. . . . And—don't be angry—but I am an older and wiser woman than you, and I am fond of you, and it's my duty to tell you that any of the lesser breed—take young Quarren for example—are of no real account, even in the society which they amuse."

"I would scarcely class Mr. Quarren with the sort you mention——"

"Why not? He's of no importance."

"Because he is kind, considerate, and unusually intelligent and interesting; and he is very capable of succeeding in whatever he undertakes," said Strelsa, slowly.

"Ricky is a nice boy; but what does he undertake?" asked Mrs. Sprowl with good-natured contempt. "He undertakes the duties, obligations, and details of a useful man in the greater household, which make him acceptable to us; and I'm bound to say that he does 'em very well. But outside of that he's a nobody. And I'll tell you just what he'll turn into; shall I? Society's

third chief bottlewasher in succession. We had one, who evolved us. He's dead. We have another. He's still talking. When he ultimately evaporates into infinity Ricky will be his natural successor. Do you want that kind of a husband?"

"Did you suppose——"

"Don't get angry, Strelsa? I didn't suppose anything. Ricky, like every other man, dangles his good-looking, good-humoured self in your vicinity. You're inclined to notice him. All I mean is that he isn't worth your pains. . . . Now you won't be offended by a plain-spoken old woman who wishes only your happiness, will you, my child?"

"No," said Strelsa, wearily, beginning to feel the fatigue of the scene.

She took her leave a few moments afterward, very unhappy because two of the pleasantest incidents in her life had been badly, if not hopelessly, marred. But Langly Sprowl was not one of them.

That hatchet-faced and immaculate gentleman, divining possibly that Strelsa might be with his aunt, arrived shortly after her departure; learned of it from a servant, and was turning on his heel without even asking for Mrs. Sprowl, when the thought occurred to him that possibly she might know Strelsa's destination.

When a servant announced him he found his aunt quite herself, grim, ready for trouble, her small green eyes fairly snapping.

They indulged in no formalities, being alone together, and caring nothing for servants' opinions. Their greeting was perfunctory; their inquiries civil. Then there ensued a short silence.

"Which way did Mrs. Leeds go?" he asked, busily twisting his long moustache.

"None of your business," rejoined his aunt.

He looked up in slight surprise, recognised a condition of things which, on second thought, surprised him still more. Because his aunt had never before noticed his affairs—had not even commented on the Ledwith matter to him. He had always felt that she disliked him too thoroughly to care.

"I don't think I understood you," he said, watching her out of shifting eyes which protruded a trifle.

"I think you will understand me before I've done with you," returned his aunt, grimly. "It's a perfectly plain matter; you've the rest of the female community to chase if you choose. Go and chase 'em for all I care —hunt from here to Reno if you like!—but I have other plans for Strelsa Leeds. Do you understand? I've put my private mark on her. There's no room for yours."

Langly's gaze which had not met hers—and never met anybody's for more than a fraction of a second—shifted. He continued his attentions to his moustache; his eyes roved; he looked at but did not see a hundred things in a second.

"You don't know where she's gone?" he inquired with characteristic pertinacity and an indifference to what she had said, absolutely stony.

"Do you mean trouble for that girl?"

"I do not."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Do you want to marry her?"

"I said that I was considering nothing in particular. We are friends."

"Keep away from her! Do you understand?"

"I really don't know whether I do or not. I suppose you mean Sir Charles."

Mrs. Sprowl turned red:

"Suppose what you like, you cold-blooded cad! But by God!—if you annoy that child I'll empty the family wash all over the sidewalk! And let the public pick it over!"

He rested his pale, protuberant eyes on her for a brief second:

"Will any of your finery figure in it? Any relics or rags once belonging to the late parent of Sir Charles?"

Her features were livid; her lips twisted, tortured under the flood of injuries which choked her. Not a word came. Exhausted for a moment she sat there grasping the gilded arms of her chair, livid as the dead save for the hell blazing in her tiny green eyes.

"I fancy that settles the laundry question," he said, while his restless glance ceaselessly swept the splendid room and his lean, sunburnt hand steadily caressed his moustache. Then, as though he had forgotten something, he rose and walked out. A footman invested him with hat and overcoat. A moment later the great doors clicked.

In the silence of the huge house there was not a sound except the whispers of servants; and these ceased presently.

All alone, amid the lighted magnificence of the vast room sat the old woman hunched in her chair, bloodless, motionless as a mass of dead flesh. Even the spark in her eyes was gone, the lids closed, the gross lower lip pendulous. Later two maids, being summoned, accom-

panied her to her boudoir, and were dismissed. Her social secretary, a pretty girl, came and left with instructions to cancel invitations for the evening.

A maid arrived with a choice of headache remedies; then, with the aid of another, disrobed her mistress and got her into bed.

Their offices accomplished, they were ordered to withdraw but to leave one light burning. It glimmered over an old-fashioned photograph on the wall—the portrait of a British officer taken in the days when whiskers, "pill-box," and frogged frock-tunic were cultivated in Her British Majesty's Service.

From where she lay she looked at him; and Sir Weyward Mallison stared back at her through his monocle.

Strelsa at home, unpinning her hat before the mirror, received word over the telephone that Mrs. Sprowl, being indisposed, regretfully recalled the invitations for the evening.

The girl's first sensation was relief, then self-reproach, quite forgetting that if Mrs. Sprowl's violent emotions had made that redoubtable old woman ill, they had also thoroughly fatigued the victim of her ill-temper and made her very miserable.

She wrote a perfunctory note of regret and civil inquiry and dispatched it, then surrendered herself to the ministrations of her maid.

The luxury of dining alone for the first time in months, appealed to her. She decided that she was not to be at home to anybody.

Langly Sprowl called about six, and was sent away. Strelsa, curled up on a divan, could hear the staccato racket that his powerful racing-car made in the street

outside. The informality of her recent host aboard the *Yulan* did not entirely please her. She listened to his departure with quiet satisfaction.

Although it was not her day, several people came and went. Flowers from various smitten youths arrived; orchids from Sprowl; nothing from Quarren. Then for nearly two hours she slept where she lay and awakened laughing aloud at something Quarren had been saying in her dream. But what it was she could not recollect.

At eight her maid came and hooked her into a comfortable and beloved second-year gown; dinner was announced; she descended the stairway in solitary state, still smiling to herself at Quarren's forgotten remark, and passed by the library just as the telephone rang there.

It may have been a flash of clairvoyance—afterward she wondered exactly what it was that made her say to her maid very confidently:

"That is Mr. Quarren. I'll speak to him."

It was Mr. Quarren. The amusing coincidence of her dream and her clairvoyance still lingering in her mind, she went leisurely to the telephone and said:

"I don't understand how I knew it was you. And I'm not sure why I came to the 'phone, because I'm not at home to anybody. But *what* was it you said to me just now?"

"When?"

"A few minutes ago while I was asleep?"

"About eight o'clock?"

She laughed: "It happened to be a few minutes before eight. How did you know that? I believe you did speak to me in my dream. Did you?"

"Strelsa, curled upon a divan . . . listened to his departure with quiet satisfaction."

"I did."

"Really?"

"I said something aloud to you about eight o'clock."

"How odd! Did you know I was asleep? But you couldn't——"

"No, of course not. I was merely thinking of you."

"You were—you happened to be thinking of *me?* And you said something aloud about me?"

"About you—and *to* you."

"How delightfully interesting! What was it, please?"

"Oh, I was only talking nonsense."

"Won't it bear repetition?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Mr. Quarren! How maddening! I'm dying with curiosity. I dreamed that you said something very amusing to me and I awoke, laughing; but now I simply cannot recollect what it was you said."

"I'll tell you some day."

"Soon? Would you tell me this evening?"

"How can I?"

"That's true. I'm not at home to anybody. So you can't drop in, can you?"

"You are not logical; I could drop in because I'm not anybody——"

"What!"

"I'm not anybody in particular——"

"You know if you begin to talk that way, after all these days, I'll ring off in a rage. You are the only man in the world to whom I'm at home even over the telephone, and if that doesn't settle your status with me, what does? . . . Are you well, Mr. Quarren?"

"Thank you, perfectly. I called you up to ask you about yourself."

"I'm tired, somehow."

"Oh, we are all that. Nothing more serious threatens you than impending slumber?"

"I said I was tired, not sleepy. I'm wide awake but horribly lazy—and inclined to slump. Where are you; at the Legation?"

"At the Founders' Club—foundered."

"What are you doing there?"

"Absolutely nothing. Reading the *Evening Post.*"

"You are dining out I suppose?"

"No."

She reflected until he spoke again, asking if she was still there.

"Oh, yes; I'm trying to think whether I want you to come around and share a solitary dinner with me. Do I want you?"

"Just a little—don't you?"

"Do you want to come?"

"Yes."

"Very much?"

"I can't tell you how much—over the telephone."

"That sounds both humble and dangerous. Which do you mean to be?"

"Humble—and very, very grateful, dear lady. May I come?"

"I—don't know. Dinner was announced a quarter of an hour ago."

"It won't take me three minutes——"

"If it takes you more you'll ring my door-bell in vain, young man."

"I'll start now! Good——"

"'Do you remember our first

toast?" he asked, smiling."

UNIV OF

"Wait! I haven't decided. Really I'm simply stupid with the accumulated fatigues of two months' frivolity. Do you mind my being stupid?"

"You know I don't——"

"Shame on you! That was not the answer. Think out the right one on your way over. *À bien tôt!*"

She had been in the drawing-room only a few moments, looking at the huge white orchids that Langly Sprowl had sent and which her butler was arranging, when Quarren was announced; and she partly turned from the orchids, extending her hand behind her in a greeting more confident and intimate than she had ever before given him.

"Look at these strange, pansy-shaped Brazilian flowers," she said. "Kindly observe that they are actually growing out of that ball of moss and fibre."

She had retained his hand for a fraction of a second longer than conventional acquaintance required, giving it a frank and friendly pressure. Now, loosing it, she found her own fingers retained, and drew them away with a little laugh of self-consciousness.

"Sentiment before dinner implies that you'll have no room for it after dinner. Here is your cocktail."

"Do you remember our first toast?" he asked, smiling.

"No."

"The toast to friendship?"

"Yes; I remember it."

She touched her lips to her glass, not looking at him. He watched her. After a moment she raised her eyes, met his gaze, returned it with one quite as audacious:

"I am drinking that same toast again—after many days," she said.

"With all that it entails?"

She nodded.

"Its chances, hazards, consequences?"

She laughed, then, looking at him, deliberately sipped from her glass, the defiant smile in her eyes still daring him and Chance and Destiny together.

When he took her out she was saying: "I really can't account for my mood to-night. I believe that seeing you again is reviving me. I was beastly stupid."

"My soporific society ought to calm, not exhilarate you."

"It never did, particularly. What a long time it is since we have seen each other. I *am* glad you came."

Seated, she asked the butler to remove the flowers which interrupted her view of Quarren.

"You haven't said anything about my personal appearance," she observed. "Am I very much battered by my merry bouts with pleasure?"

"Not much."

"You wretch! Do you mean to say that I am marked at all?"

"You look rather tired, Mrs. Leeds."

"I know I do. By daylight it's particularly visible. . . . But—do *you* mind?"

Her charming head was bent over her grapefruit: she lifted her gray eyes under level brows, looking across the table at him.

"I mind anything that concerns you," he said.

"I mean—are you disappointed because I'm growing old and haggard?"

"I think you are even more beautiful than you were."

She laughed gaily and continued her dinner. "I

had to drag that out of you, poor boy. But you see I'm uneasy; because imprudence *is* stamping the horrid imprint of maturity on me very rapidly; and I'm beginning to keep a more jealous eye on my suitors. You *were* one. Do you deny your guilt?"

"I do not."

"Then I shall never release you. I intend to let no guilty man escape. *Am* I very much changed, Mr. Quarren?" she said a trifle wistfully.

He did not answer immediately. After a few moments she glanced at him again and met his gaze.

"Well?" she prompted him, laughing; "are you not neglecting your manners as a declared suitor?"

"You *have* changed."

"What a perfect pill you are!" she exclaimed, vexed—"you're casting yourself for the rôle of the honest friend—and I simply hate it! Young sir, do you not understand that I've breakfasted, lunched and dined too long on flattery to endure anything more wholesome? If you can't lie to me like a gentleman and a suitor your usefulness in my entourage is ended."

He said: "Do you want me to talk shop with you? I get rather tired of my trade, sometimes. It's my trade to lie, you know."

She looked up, quickly, but he was smiling.

They remained rather silent after that. Coffee was served at table; she lighted a cigarette for him and, later, one for herself, strolling off into the drawing-room with it between her fingers, one hand resting lightly on her hip.

She seemed to have an inclination to wander about or linger before the marble fireplace and blow delicate rings of smoke at her own reflection in the mirror.

He stood a little distance behind her, watching her, and she nodded affably to him in the glass:

"I'm quite changed; you are right. I'm not as nice as I was when I first knew you. . . . I'm not as contented; I'm restless—I wasn't then. . . . Amusement is becoming a necessity to me; and I'm not particular about the kind—as long as it does amuse me. Tell me something exciting."

"A cradle song is what you require."

"How impudent of you. I've a mind to punish you by retiring to that same cradle. I'm dreadfully cross, too. Do you realise that?"

"I realise how tired you are."

"And—I'll never again be rested," she said thoughtfully, looking at her mirrored self. "I seem to understand that, now, for the first time. . . . Something in me will always remain a little tired. I wonder what. Do you know?"

"Conscience?" he suggested, laughing.

"Do you think so? I thought it was my heart."

"Have you acquired one?"

She laughed, too, then glanced at him askance in the glass, and turned around toward him, still smiling.

"I believe I didn't have any heart when I first knew you. Did I?"

"I believe not," he said lightly. "Has one germinated?"

"I really don't know. What do you think?"

He took her cigarette from her and tossed it, with his own, into the fire. She seated herself on a sofa and bent toward the blaze, her dimpled elbows denting her silken knees, her chin balanced between forefinger and thumb.

Presently she said, not looking at him: "Somehow, I've changed. I'm not the woman you knew. I'm beginning to realise it. It seems absurd: it was only a few weeks ago. But the world has whirled very swiftly. Each day was a little life-time in itself; a week a century condensed; Time became only a concentrated essence, one drop of which contained æons of experience. . . . I wonder whether my silly head *was* turned a little. . . . People said too much to me: there were too many of them—and they came too near. . . . And do you know—looking back at it now as I sit here talking to you—I—it seems absurd—but I believe that I was really a trifle lonely at times."

She interlaced her fingers and rested her chin on the back of them.

"I thought of you on various occasions," she added.

He was leaning against the mantel, one foot on the fender.

Her eyes rested on that foot, then lifted slowly until they remained fixed on his face which was shadowed by his hand as though to shield his eyes from the bracket light.

For a time she sat motionless, considering him, interested in his silence and abstraction—in the set of his shoulders, and the unconscious grace of him. Light, touching his short blond hair, made it glossy like a boy's where his hand had disarranged it above the forehead. Certainly it was very pleasant to see him again —agreeable to be with him—not exactly restful, perhaps, but distinctly agreeable—for even in the frequent silences that had crept in between them there was no invitation to repose of mind. On the contrary, she was perfectly conscious of a reserve force now awaking—

of a growing sense of freshness within her; of physical renewal, of unsuspected latent vigour.

"Are you attempting to go to sleep, Mr. Quarren?" she inquired at last.

He dropped his hand, smiling: she made an instinctive move—scarcely an invitation, scarcely even perceptible. But he came over and seated himself on the arm of the lounge beside her.

"Your letters," he said, "did a lot for me."

"I wrote very few. . . . Did they really interest you?"

"A lot."

"How?"

"They helped that lame old gaffer, Time, to limp along toward the back door of Eternity."

"How do you mean?"

"Otherwise he would never have stirred a step—until to-night."

"That is very gallant of you, Mr. Quarren—but a little sentimental—isn't it?"

"Do you think so?"

"I don't know. I'm a poor judge of real sentiment—being unaccustomed to it."

"How many men made you declarations?"

"Oh; is *that* real sentiment? I thought it was merely love."

He looked at her. "Don't," he said. "You mustn't harden. Don't become like the rest."

She said, amused, or pretending to be: "You are clever; I *have* grown hard. To-day I can survey, unmoved, many, many things which I could not even look at yesterday. But it makes life more interesting. Don't you think so?"

"Do you, Mrs. Leeds?"

"I think so. . . . A woman might as well know the worst truths about life—and about men."

"Not about men."

"Do you prefer her to remain a dupe?"

"Is anybody happy unless life dupes them?"

"By 'life' you mean 'men.' You have the seraglio point of view. You probably prefer your women screened and veiled."

"We are all born veiled. God knows why we ever tear the film."

"Mr. Quarren—are you becoming misanthropic?" she exclaimed, laughing. But under his marred eyes of a boy she saw shadows, and the pale induration already stamped on the flesh over the cheek-bones.

"What have you been doing with yourself all these weeks?" she asked, curiously.

"Working at my trade."

"You seem thinner."

"Fewer crumbs have fallen from the banquet, perhaps. I keep Lent when I must."

"You are beginning to speak in a way that you know I dislike—aren't you?" she asked, turning around in her seat to face him.

He laughed.

"You make me very angry," she said; "I like you—I'm quite happy with you—and suddenly you try to tell me that my friendship is lavished on an unworthy man; that my taste is low, and that you're a kind of a social jackal—an upper servant——

"I feed on what the pack leaves—and I wash their fragile plates for them," he said lightly.

"What else?" she asked, furious.

"I take out the unfledged for a social airing; I exercise the mature; I smooth the plumage of the aged; I apply first aid to the socially injured; lick the hands that feed me, as in duty bound; tell my brother jackals which hands to lick and which to snap at; curl up and go to sleep in sunny boudoirs without being put out into the backyard; and give first-class vaudeville performances at a moment's notice, acting as manager, principals, chorus, prompter, and carpenter."

He laughed so gaily into her unsmiling eyes that suddenly she lost control of herself and her fingers closed tight.

"What are you saying!" she said, fiercely. "Are you telling me that this is the kind of a man I care enough for to write to—to think about—think about a great deal—care enough about to dine with in my own house when I denied myself to everybody else! Is that all you are after all? And am I finding my level by liking you?"

He said, slowly: "I could have been anything—I could be yet—if you——"

"If you are not anything for your own sake you will never be for anybody's!" she retorted. . . . "I refuse to believe that you are what you say, anyway. It hurts—it hurts——"

"It only hurts me, Mrs. Leeds——"

"It hurts *me!* I *do* like you. I was glad to see you—you don't know how glad. Your letters to me were—were interesting. *You* have always been interesting, from the very first—more so than many men—more than most men. And now you admit to me what kind of a man you really are. If I believe it, what am I to think of myself? Can you tell me?"

Flushed, exasperated by she knew not what, and more and more in earnest every moment, she leaned forward looking at him, her right hand tightening on the arm of the sofa, the other clenched over her twisted handkerchief.

"I could stand anything!—my friendship for you could stand almost anything except what you pretend you are—and what other malicious tongues will say if you continue to repeat it!—And it *has* been said already about you! Do you know that? People *do* say that of you. People even say so to me—tell me you are worthless—warn me against—against——"

"What?"

"Caring—taking you seriously! And it's because you deliberately exhibit disrespect for yourself! A man—*any* man is what he chooses to be, and people always believe him what he pretends to be. Is there any harm in pretending to dignity and worth when—when you can be the peer of any man? What's the use of inviting contempt? This very day a woman spoke of you with contempt. I denied what she said. . . . I'd rather they'd say anything else about you—that you had vices—a vigorous, wilful, unmanageable man's vices!—than to say *that* of you!"

"What?"

"That you amount to nothing."

"Do you care what they say, Mrs. Leeds?"

"Of course! It strikes at my own self-respect!"

"Do you care—otherwise?"

"I care—as a friend, naturally——"

"Otherwise still?"

"No!"

"Could you ever care?"

"No," she said, nervously.

She sat breathing faster and more irregularly, watching him. He looked up and smiled at her, rested so, a moment, then rose to take his leave.

She stretched out one arm toward the electric bell, but her fingers seemed to miss it, and remained resting against the silk-hung wall.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Must you?"

"I think I'd better."

"Very well."

He waited, but she did not touch the bell button. She seemed to be waiting for him to go; so he offered his hand, pleasantly, and turned away toward the hall. And, rising leisurely, she descended the stairs with him in silence.

"Good-night," he said again.

"Good-night. I am sorry you are going."

"Did you wish me to remain a little longer?"

"I—don't know what I wish. . . ."

Her cheeks were deeply flushed; the hand he took into his again seemed burning.

"It's fearfully hot in here," she said. "Please muffle up warmly because it's bitter weather out doors"—and she lifted the other hand as though unconsciously and passed her finger tips over his fur collar.

"Do you feel feverish?"

"A little. Do you notice how warm my hand is?"

"You haven't caught malaria in the tropics, have you?"

"No, you funny man. I'm never ill. But it's odd how burning hot I seem to be——"

She looked down at her fingers which still lay loosely across his.

They were silent for a while. And, little by little it seemed to her as though within her a curious stillness was growing, responsive to the quiet around her—a serenity stealing over her, invading her mind like a delicate mist—a dreamy mental lethargy, soothing, obscuring sense and thought.

Vaguely she was aware of their contact. He neither spoke nor stirred; and her palm burned softly, meltingly against his.

At last he lifted her hand and laid his lips to it in silence. Small head lowered, she dreamily endured his touch—a slight caress over her forehead—the very ghost of contact; suffered his cheek against hers, closer, never stirring.

Thought drifted, almost dormant, lulled by infinite and rhythmical currents which seemed to set her body swaying, gently; and, listless, non-resistant, conscious of the charm of it, she gradually yielded to the sorcery.

Then, like a shaft of sunlight slanting through a dream and tearing its fabric into tatters, his kiss on her lips awoke her.

She strove to turn her mouth from his—twisted away from him, straining, tearing her body from his arms; and leaned back against the stair-rail, gray eyes expressionless as though dazed. He would have spoken, but she shook her head and closed both ears with her hands; nor would she even look at him, now.

Sight and hearing sealed against him; pale, expressionless, she stood there awaiting his departure. And presently he opened the iron and glass door; a flurry

of icy air swept her; she heard the metallic snap of the spring lock, and opened her heavy eyes.

Deadly tired she turned and ascended the stairs to her bedroom and locked the door against her maid.

Thought dragged, then halted with her steps as she dropped onto the seat before the dresser and took her throbbing head in her hands. Cheeks and lips grew hotter; she was aware of strange senses dawning; of strange nerves signalling; stranger responses—of a subtle fragrance in her breath so strange that she became conscious of it.

She straightened up staring at her flushed reflection in the glass while through and through her shot new pulses, and every breath grew tremulously sweet to the verge of pain as she recoiled dismayed from the unknown.

Unknown still!—for she crouched there shrinking from the revelation—from the restless wonder of the awakening, wilfully deaf, blind, ignorant, defying her other self with pallid flashes of self-contempt.

Then fear came—fear of him, fear of herself, defiance of him, and defiance of this other self, glimpsed only as yet, and yet already dreaded with every instinct. But it was a losing battle. Truth is very patient. And at last she looked Truth in the eyes.

So, after all, she was what she had understood others were or must one day become. Unawakened, pure in her inherent contempt for the lesser passion; incredulous that it could ever touch her; out of nothing had sprung the lower menace, full armed, threatening her—out of a moment's lassitude, a touch of a man's hand, and his lips on hers! And now all her life was already behind her—childhood, girlhood, wifehood—all, all

behind her now; and she, a stranger even to herself, alone on an unknown road; an unknown world before her.

With every instinct inherent and self-inculcated, instincts of modesty, of reticence, of self-control, of pride, she quivered under this fierce humiliation born of self-knowledge—knowledge scornfully admitted and defied with every breath—but no longer denied.

She *was* as others were—fashioned of that same and common clay, capable of the lesser emotions, shamefully and incredibly conscious of them—so keenly, so incomprehensibly, that, at one unthinkable instant, they had obscured and were actually threatening to obliterate the things of the mind.

Was this the evolution that her winter's idleness and gaiety and the fatigues of pleasure had been so subtly preparing for her? Was that strange moment, at the door, the moment that man's enemy had been awaiting, to find her unprepared?

Wretched, humiliated, she bowed her head above the flowers and silver on her dresser—the fairest among the Philistines who had so long unconsciously thanked God that she was not like other women in the homes of Gath and in the sinful streets of Ascalon.

CHAPTER VI

Strelsa was no longer at home to Quarren, even over the telephone. He called her up two or three times in as many days, ventured to present himself at her house twice without being received, and finally wrote her a note. But at the end of the month the note still remained unanswered.

However, there was news of her, sometimes involving her with Langly Sprowl, but more often with Sir Charles Mallison. Also, had Quarren not dropped out of everything so completely, he might easily have met her dozens of times in dozens of places. But for a month now he had returned every day from his office to his room in the Legation, and even the members of that important diplomatic body found his door locked, after dinner, though his light sometimes brightened the transom until morning.

Westguard, after the final rupture with his aunt, had become a soured hermit—sourer because of the low motives of the public which was buying his book by the thousands and reading it for the story, exclusively.

His aunt had cast him off; to him she was the overfed embodiment of society, so it pleased him to consider the rupture as one between society and himself. It tasted of martyrdom, and now his own public had vulgarly gone back on him according to his ideals: nobody

cared for his economics, his social evils, his moral philosophy; only what he considered the unworthy part of his book was eagerly absorbed and discussed. The proletariat had grossly betrayed him; a hermit's exemplary but embittered career was apparently all that remained for his declining years.

So, after dinner, he, too, retired to seclusion behind bolted doors, pondering darkly on a philosophic novel which should be no novel at all but a dignified and crushing rebuke to mankind—a solid slice of moral cake thickly frosted with social economics, heavy with ethical plums, and without any story to it whatever.

Meanwhile his book had passed into the abhorred class of best sellers.

As for Lacy and O'Hara, both had remarked Quarren's abrupt retirement and his absence from that section of the social puddle which he was accustomed to embellish and splash in. O'Hara, inclining more toward sporting circles, noticed Quarren's absence less; but Lacy, after the first week, demanded an explanation at the dinner-table.

"You spoiled a party for Mrs. Lannis," he said—"and Winnifred Miller was almost in tears over the charity tableaux——"

"I wrote them both in plenty of time, Jack."

"Yes. But who is there to take your place? Whatever you touch is successful. Barent Van Dyne made a dub of himself."

"They must break in another pup," said Quarren, amused.

"You mean that you're chucking the whole bally thing for keeps?"

"Practically."

"Why?" asked O'Hara, looking up blankly.

"Oh," said Quarren laughing, "I'm curious to find out what business I really am in. Until this week I've never had time to discover that I was trying to be a broker in real estate. And I've just found out that I've been one for almost three years, and never knew it."

"One's own company is the best," growled Westguard. "The monkey people sicken you and the public make you ill. Solitude is the only remedy."

"Not for me," said Quarren; "I could breakfast, lunch, and dine with and on the public; and I'm laying plans to do it."

"They'll turn your stomach——"

"Oh, dry up, Karl!" said O'Hara; "there's a medium between extremes where you can get a good sportin' chance at anythin'—horse, dog, girl—anythin' you fancy. You'd like some of my friends, now, Ricky!—they're a good sort, all game, all jolly, all interestin' as hell——"

"*I* don't want to meet any cock-fighters," growled Westguard.

"They're all right, too—but there are all kinds of interestin' people in my circles—writers like Karl, huntin' people, a professional here and there—and then there's that fascinatin' Mrs. Wyland-Baily, the best trap-shot——"

"Trap-shot," repeated Westguard in disgust, and took his cigar and himself into seclusion.

Quarren also pushed back his chair, preparing to rise.

"Doin' anythin'?" inquired O'Hara, desiring to be kind. "Young Calahan and the Harlem Mutt have it

out at the Cataract Club to-night," he added persuasively.

"Another time, thanks," said Quarren: "I've letters to write."

He wrote them—all the business letters he could think of, concentrating his thoughts as much as possible. Afterward he lay down on the lounge with a book, and remained there for an hour, although he changed books every few minutes. This was becoming a bad habit. But it was difficult reading although it ranged from Kipling to the Book of Common Prayer; and at last he gave it up and, turning over buried his head in the cushions.

This wouldn't do either: he racked his brain for further employment, found excuses for other business letters, wrote them, then attacked a pile of social matters —notes and letters heretofore deliberately neglected to the ragged edge of decency.

He replied to them all, and invariably in the negative.

It gave him something to do to go out to the nearest lamp post and mail his letters. But when again he came back into his room the silence there left him hesitating on his threshold.

But he went in and locked his door, and kept his back turned to the desk where pen and ink were tempting him as usual, and almost beyond endurance now. And at last he weakened, and wrote to her once more:

"My dear Mrs. Leeds—

"I feel sure that your failure to answer my note of last week was unintentional.

"Some day, when you have a moment, would you write me a line saying that you will be at home to me?

"Very sincerely yours,

"Richard Stanley Quarren."

He took this note to the nearest District Messenger Office; then returned to his room.

After an interminable time the messenger reported for the signature. Mrs. Leeds was not at home and he had left the note as directed.

The night was a white one. He did not feel very well when he sat scanning the morning paper over his coffee. Recently he had formed the custom of reading two columns only in the paper—Real Estate News and Society. In the latter column Strelsa usually figured.

She figured as usual this morning; and he read the fulsome stuff attentively. Also there was a flourish concerning an annual event at the Santa Regina.

And Quarren read this very carefully; and made up his mind as he finished the paragraph.

The conclusion he came to over his coffee and newspaper materialised that afternoon at a Charity Bazaar, where, as he intended, he met Strelsa Leeds face to face. She said, coolly amiable:

"Have you been away? One never sees you these days."

"I have been nowhere," he said, pleasantly.

She shook her pretty head in reproof:

"Is it good policy for a young man to drop out of sight? Our world forgets over-night."

He laughed: "Something similar has been intimated

to me by others—but less gently. I'm afraid I've offended some people."

"Oh, so you have already been disciplined?"

"Verbally trounced, admonished, and still smarting under the displeasure of the powers that reign. They seem to resent my Sunday out—yet even their other domestics have that. And it's the first I've taken in three years. I think I'll have to give notice to my Missus."

"The spectre of servitude still seems to obsess your humour," she observed indifferently.

"I *am* that spectre, Mrs. Leeds."

"You certainly look pallid enough for any disembodied rôle. You have not been ill, by any chance?"—carelessly.

"Not at all, thank you. Rude health and I continue to link arms."

"Then it is not by chance that you absent yourself from the various festivities where your part is usually supposed to be a leading one?"

"All cooks eventually develop a distaste for their own concoctions," he explained gravely.

She lifted her eyebrows: "Yet you are here this afternoon."

"Oh, yes. Charity has not yet palled on my palate—perhaps because I need so much myself."

"I have never considered you an object of charity."

"Then I must draw your kind attention to my pitiable case by doing a little begging. . . . Could I ask your forgiveness, for example? And perhaps obtain it?"

Her face flushed. "I have nothing to forgive you, Mr. Quarren," she said with decision.

"Do you mean that?"

"Certainly."

"I scarcely know how to take your—generosity."

"I offer none. There is no occasion for generosity or for the exercise of any virtue, cardinal or otherwise. You have not offended me, nor I you—I trust. . . . Have I?"

"No," he said.

Men came up to speak to her; one or two women nodded to her from nearby groups which presently mingled, definitely separating her from Quarren unless either he or she chose to evade the natural trend of things. Neither made the effort. Then Sir Charles Mallison joined her, and Quarren, smilingly accepting that gentleman's advent as his own congé, took his leave of Strelsa and went his way—which chanced, also, to be the way of Mrs. Lester Caldera, very fetching in lilac gown and hat.

Susanne Lannis, lips slightly curling, looked after them, touching Strelsa's elbow:

"Cyrille simply cannot let Ricky alone," she said. "The bill-posters will find a fence for her if she doesn't come to her senses."

"Who?" asked Strelsa, as one or two people laughed guardedly.

"Why, Cyrille Caldera. *Elle s'affiche, ma chère!*"

"Mrs. Caldera!" repeated the girl, surprised.

"*And* Ricky! Are you blind, Strelsa? It's been on for two weeks or more. And she'd better not play too confidently with Ricky. You can usually forecast what a wild animal will do, never how a trained one is going to behave."

"Such scandal!" laughed Chrysos Lacy. "How

many of us can afford to turn our backs to the rest of the cage even for an instant? Sir Charles, I simply don't dare to go away. Otherwise I'd purchase several of those glittering articles yonder—whatever they are. Do you happen to know?"

"Automatic revolvers. The cartridges are charged with Japanese perfumes. Did you never see one?" he asked, turning to Strelsa. But she was not listening; and he transferred his attention to Chrysos.

Several people moved forward to examine the pretty and apparently deadly little weapons; Sir Charles was called upon to explain the Japanese game of perfumes, and everybody began to purchase the paraphernalia, pistols, cartridges, targets, and counters.

Sir Charles came back, presently, to where Strelsa still stood, listlessly examining laces.

"All kinds of poor people have blinded themselves making these pretty things," she said, as Sir Charles came up beside her. "My only apparent usefulness is to buy them, I suppose."

He offered her one of the automatic pistols.

"It's loaded," he cautioned her, solemnly.

"What an odd gift!" she said, surprised, taking it gingerly into her gloved hand. "Is it really for me? And why?"

"Are you timid about firearms?" he asked, jestingly.

"No. . . . I don't know anything about them—except to keep my finger away from the trigger. I know enough to do that."

He supposed that she also was jesting, and her fastidious handling of the weapon amused him. And when she asked him if it was safe to carry in her muff, he

assured her very gravely that she might venture to do so. "Turn it loose on the first burglar," he added, "and his regeneration will begin in all the forty-nine odours of sanctity."

Strelsa smiled without comprehending. Cyrille Caldera was standing just beyond them, apparently interested in antique jewellery, trying the effect of various linked gems against her lilac gown, and inviting Quarren's opinion of the results. Their backs were turned; Ricky's blond head seemed to come unreasonably close to Cyrille's at moments. Once Mrs. Caldera thoughtlessly laid a pretty hand on his arm as though in emphasis. Their unheard conversation was evidently amusing them.

Strelsa's smile remained unaltered; people were coming constantly to pay their respects to her; and they lingered, attracted and amused by her unusual gaiety, charm, and wit.

Her mind seemed suddenly to have become crystal clear; her gay retorts to lively badinage, and her laughing epigrams were deliciously spontaneous. A slight exhilaration, without apparent reason, was transforming her, swiftly, into an incarnation entirely unknown even to herself.

Conscious of a wonderful mood never before experienced, perfectly aware of her unusual brilliancy and beauty, surprised and interested in the sudden revelation of powers within her still unexercised, she felt herself, for the first time in her life, in contact with things heretofore impalpable—and, in spirit, with delicate fingers, she gathered up instinctively those intangible threads with which man is guided as surely as though driven in chains of steel.

And all the while she was aware of Quarren's boyish head bending almost too near to Cyrille Caldera's over the trays of antique jewels; and all the while she was conscious of the transfiguration in process—that not only a new self was being evolved for her out of the débris of the old, but that the world itself was changing around her—and a new Heaven and a new earth were being born—and a new hell.

That evening she fought it out with herself with a sort of deadly intelligence. Alone in her room, seated, and facing her mirrored gaze unflinchingly, she stated her case, minutely, to herself from beginning to end; then called the only witness for the prosecution—herself—and questioned that witness without mercy.

Did she care for Quarren? Apparently. How much? A great deal. Was she in love with him? She could not answer. Wherein did he differ from other men she knew—Sir Charles, for example? She only knew that he *was* different. Perhaps he was nobler? No. More intelligent? No. Kinder? No. More admirable? No. More gentle, more sincere, less selfish? No. Did he, as a man, compare favorably with other men—Sir Charles for example? The comparison was not in Quarren's favor.

Wherein, then, lay her interest in him? She could not answer. Was she perhaps sorry for him? Very. Why? Because she believed him capable of better things. Then the basis of her regard for him was founded on pity. No; because from the beginning—even before he had unmasked—she had been sensible of an interest in him different from any interest she had ever before felt for any man.

This uncompromisingly honest answer silenced her

mentally for some moments; then she lifted her resolute gray eyes to the eyes of the mirrored witness:

If that is true, then the attraction was partly physical? She could not answer. Pressed for a statement she admitted that it might be that.

Then the basis of her regard for him was ignoble? She found pleasure in his intellectual attractions. But the basis had not been intellectual? No. It had been material? Yes. And she had never forgotten the light pressure of that masked Harlequin's spangled arm around her while she desperately counted out the seconds of that magic minute forfeited to him? No; she had never forgotten. It was a sensation totally unknown to her before that moment? Yes. Had she experienced it since that time? Yes. When? When he first told her that he loved her. And afterward? Yes. When?

In the cheeks of the mirrored witness a faint fire began to burn: her own face grew pink: but she answered, looking the shadowy witness steadily in the eyes:

"When he took my hand at the door—and during—whatever happened—afterward."

And she excused the witness and turned her back to the looking-glass.

The only witness for the defence was the accused—unless her own heart were permitted to testify. Or—and there seemed to be some slight confusion here—*was* Quarren on trial? Or was she herself?

This threatened to become a serious question; she strove to think clearly, to reason; but only evoked the pale, amused face of Quarren from inner and chaotic consciousness until the visualisation remained fixed, de-

fying obliteration. And she accepted the mental spectre for the witness box.

"Ricky," she said, "do you really love me?"

But the clear-cut, amused face seemed to mock her question with the smile she knew so well—so well, alas!

"Why are you unworthy?" she said again—"you who surely are equipped for a nobler life. What is it in you that I have responded to? If a woman is so colourless as to respond merely to love in the abstract, she is worth nothing better, nothing higher, than what she has evoked. For you are no better than other men, Ricky; indeed you are less admirable than many; and to compare you to Sir Charles is not advantageous to you, poor boy—poor boy."

In vain she strove to visualise Sir Charles; she could not. All she could do was to mentally enumerate his qualities; and she did so, the amused face of Quarren looking on at her from out of empty space.

"Ricky, Ricky," she said, "am I no better than that?—am I fit only for such a response?—to find the contact of your hand so wonderful?—to thrill with the consciousness of your nearness—to let my senses drift, contented merely by your touch—yielding to the charm of it—suffering even your lips' embrace——"

She shuddered slightly, drawing one hand across her eyes, then sitting straight, she faced his smiling phantom, resolute to end it now forever.

"If I am such a woman," she said, "and you are the kind of man I know you to be—then is it time for me to fast and pray, lest I enter into temptation. . . . Into the one temptation I have never before known, Ricky—and which, in my complacency and pride I never dreamed that I should encounter.

"And it is coming to that! . . . A girl must be honest with herself or all life is only the same smiling lie. I'm ashamed to be honest, Ricky; but I must be. You are not very much of a man—otherwise I might find some reason for caring: and now there is none; and yet —I care—God knows why—or what it is in you that I care for!—But I do—I am beginning to care—and I don't know why; I—don't—know why——"

She dropped her face in her hands, sitting there bowed low over her knees. And there, hour after hour she fought it out with herself and with the amused spectre ever at her elbow—so close at moments that some unaroused nerve fell a-trembling in its sleep, threatening to awaken those quiet senses that she already feared for their unknown powers.

The season was approaching its end, still kicking now and then spasmodically, but pretty nearly done for. No particularly painful incidents marked its demise except the continued absence of Quarren from social purlieus accustomed to his gay presence and adroit executive abilities.

After several demoralised cotillions had withstood the shock of his absence, and a dozen or more functions had become temporarily disorganised because he declined to occupy himself with their success; and after a number of hostesses had filled in his place at dinner, at theatres, at week-ends, on yachts and coaches; and after an unprecedented defiance of two summonses to the hazardous presence of Mrs. Sprowl, he obeyed a third subpœna, and presented himself with an air of cheerful confidence that instantly enraged her.

The old lady lay abed with nothing more compromising than a toothache; Quarren was conducted to the inner shrine; she glared at him hideously from her pillows; and for one moment he felt seriously inclined to run.

"Where have you been?" she wheezed.

"Nowhere in particu——"

"I know damn well you've been nowhere," she burst out. "Molly Wycherly's dance went to pieces because she was fool enough to trust things to you. Do you know who led? That great oaf, Barent Van Dyne! He led like a trick elephant, too!"

Quarren looked politely distressed.

"And there are a dozen hostesses perfectly furious with you," continued the old lady, pounding the pillows with a fat arm—"parties of all sorts spoiled, idiocies committed, dinners either commonplace or blank failures—what the devil possesses you to behave this way?"

"I'm tired," he said, politely.

"What!"

He smiled:

"Oh, the place suits, Mrs. Sprowl; I haven't any complaint; and the work and wages are easy; and it's comfortable below-stairs. But — I'm just tired."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking *about* my employers, and I'm talking *like* the social upper-servant that I am—or was. I'm merely giving a respectable warning; that is the airy purport of my discourse, Mrs. Sprowl."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes, I think so," he said, wearily.

"Well, then, what the devil *are* you saying?"

"Merely that I've dropped out of service to engage in trade."

"You can't!" she yelled, sitting up in bed so suddenly that her unquiet tooth took the opportunity to assert itself.

She clapped a pudgy hand to her cheek, squinting furiously at Quarren:

"You *can't* drop out," she shouted. "Don't you ever want to amount to anything?"

"Yes, I do. That's why I'm doing it."

"Don't act like a fool! Haven't you any ambition?"

"That also is why," he said pleasantly. "I am ambitious to be out of livery and see what my own kind will do to me."

"Well, you'll see!" she threatened—"you'll see what we'll do to you——"

"*You're* not my kind. I always supposed you were, but you all knew better from the day I took service with you——"

"Ricky!"

"It is perfectly true, Mrs. Sprowl. My admittance included a livery and the perennial prerogative of amusing people. But I had no money, no family affiliations with the very amiable people who found me useful. Only, in common with them, I had the inherent taste for idleness and the genius for making it endurable to you all. So you welcomed me very warmly; and you have been very kind to me. . . . But, somewhere or other—in some forgotten corner of me—an odd and old-fashioned idea awoke the other day. . . . I think perhaps it awoke when you reminded me that to serve

you was one thing and to marry among you something very different."

"Ricky! Do you want to drive me to the yelling verge of distraction? I didn't say or intimate or dream any such thing! You know perfectly well you're not only with us but *of* us. Nobody ever imagined otherwise. But you can't marry any girl you pick out. Sometimes she won't; sometimes her family won't. It's the same everywhere. You have no money. Of course I intend that you shall eventually marry money—What the devil are you laughing at?"

"I beg your pardon——"

"I said that you would marry well. Was that funny? I also said, once—and I repeat it now, that I have my own plans for one or two girls—Strelsa Leeds included. I merely asked you to respect my wishes in that single matter; and bang! you go off and blow up and maroon yourself and sulk until nobody knows what's the matter with you. Don't be a fool. Everybody likes you; every girl *can't* love you—but I'll bet many of 'em do. . . . Pick one out and come to me—if that's your trouble. Go ahead and pick out what you fancy; and ten to one it will be all right, and between you and me we'll land the little lady!"

"You're tremendously kind——"

"I know I am. I'm always doing kindnesses—and nobody likes me, and they'd bite my head off, every one of 'em—if they weren't afraid it would disagree with them," she added grimly.

Quarren rose and came over to the bedside.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Sprowl," he said. "And—I like you—somehow—I really do."

"The devil you do," said the old lady.

"It's a curious fact," he insisted, smiling.

"Get out with you, Ricky! And I want you to come——"

"No—please."

"What?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I want to see some real people again. I've forgotten what they resemble."

"That's a damned insolent remark!" she gasped.

"Not meant to be. *You* are real enough, Heaven knows. But," and his smile faded—"I've taken a month off to think it out. And, do you know, thinking being an unaccustomed luxury, I've enjoyed it. Imagine my delight and surprise, Mrs. Sprowl, when I discovered that my leisurely reflections resulted in the discovery that I had a mind—a real one—capable of reason and conclusions. And so when I actually came to a conclusion my joy knew no bounds——"

"Ricky! Stop those mental athletics! Do you hear? I've a toothache and a backache and I can't stand 'em!"

Quarren was laughing now; and presently a grim concession to humour relaxed the old lady's lips till her fat face creased.

"All right," she said; "go and play with the ragged boy around the corner, my son. Then when you're ready come home and get your face washed."

"May I come occasionally to chat with you?"

"As though you'd do that if you didn't have to!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"I think you know better."

"No, I don't!" she snapped. "I know men and

women; that's all I know. And as you're one of the two species I don't expect anything celestial from you. . . . And you'd better go, now."

She turned over on her pillow with a grunt: Quarren laughed, lifted one of her pudgy and heavily ringed hands from the coverlet, and, still smiling, touched the largest diamond with his lips.

"I think," he said, "that you are one of the very few I really like in your funny unreal world. . . . You're so humanly bad."

"What!" she shouted, floundering to a sitting posture.

But, looking back at her from the door, he found her grinning.

CHAPTER VII

Premonitions of spring started the annual social exodus; because in the streets of Ascalon and in the busy ways of Gath spring becomes summer over night and all Philistia is smitten by the sun.

And all the meanness and shabbiness and effrontery of the monstrous city, all its civic pretence and tarnished ostentation are suddenly revealed when the summer sun blazes over Ascalon. Wherefore the daintier among the Philistines flee—idler, courtier, dangler and squire of dames—not to return until the first snowflakes fall and the gray veil of November descends once more over the sorry sham of Ascalon.

Out of the inner temple, his ears still ringing with the noise of the drones, Quarren had gone forth. And already, far away in the outer sunshine, he could see real people at work and at play, millions and millions of them—and a real sky overhead edging far horizons.

He began real life once more in a bad way, financially; his money being hopelessly locked up in Tappan-Zee Park, a wooded and worthless tract of unimproved land along the Hudson which Quarren had supposed Lester Caldera was to finance for him.

Recently, however, that suave young man had smilingly denied making any such promise to anybody; which surprised and disconcerted Quarren who had no money with which to build sewers, roads, and electric

plants. And he began to realise how carelessly he had drifted into the enterprise—how carelessly he had drifted into everything and past everything for the last five years.

After a hunt for a capitalist among and outside his circle of friends and acquaintances he began to appreciate his own lunacy even more thoroughly.

Then Lester Caldera, good-naturedly, offered to take the property off his hands for less than a third of what he paid Sprowl for it; and as Quarren's adjoining options were rapidly expiring he was forced to accept. Which put the boy almost entirely out of business; so he closed his handsome office downtown and opened another in the front parlour of an old and rather dingy brown-stone house on the east side of Lexington Avenue near Fiftieth Street and hung out his sign once more over the busy streets of Ascalon.

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Also he gave up his quarters at the Irish Legation to the unfeigned grief of the diplomats domiciled there, and established himself in the back parlour and extension of the Lexington Avenue house, ready at all moments now for business or for sleep. Neither bothered him excessively.

He wrote no more notes to Strelsa Leeds—that is, he posted no more, however many he may have composed. Rumours from the inner temple concerning her and Langly Sprowl and Sir Charles Mallison drifted out into the real world every day or so. But he

never went back to the temple to verify them. That life was ended for him. Sometimes, sitting alone at his desk, he fancied that he could almost hear the far laughter of the temple revels, and the humming of the drones. But the roar of the street-car, rushing, grinding through the steel-ribbed streets of Ascalon always drowned it, and its far seen phantom glitter became a burning reality where the mid-day sun struck the office sign outside his open window.

Fate, the ugly jade, was making faces at him, all kinds of faces. Just now she wore the gaunt mask of poverty, but Quarren continued to ignore her, because to him, there was no real menace in her skinny grin, no real tragedy in what she threatened.

Real tragedy lay in something very different—perhaps in manhood awaking from ignoble lethargy to learn its own degeneracy in a young girl's scornful eyes.

All day long he sat in his office attending to the trivial business that came into it—not enough so far to give him a living.

In the still spring evenings he retired to his quarters in the back parlour, bathed, dressed, looking out at the cats on the back fences. Then he went forth to dine either at the Legation or with some one of the few friends he had cared to retain in that magic-lantern world which he at last had found uninhabitable—a world in which few virile men remain very long—fewer and fewer as the years pass on. For the gilding on the temple dome is peeling off; and the laughter is dying out, and the hum of the drones sounds drowsy like unreal voices heard in summer dreams.

"It is the passing of an imbecile society," declaimed

Westguard—" the dying sounds of its meaningless noise—the first omens of a silence which foretells annihilation. Out of chaos will gradually emerge the elements of a real society—the splendid social and intellectual brotherhood of the future——"

" See my forthcoming novel," added Lacy, " $1.35 net, for sale at all booksellers or sent post-paid on receipt of——"

" You little fashionable fop!" growled Westguard —" there's a winter coming for all butterflies!"

" I've seen 'em dancing over the snow on a mild and sunny day," retorted Lacy. " Karl, my son, the nobly despairing writer with a grouch never yet convinced anybody."

" I don't despair," retorted Westguard. " This country is getting what it wants and what it deserves, ladled out to it in unappetising gobs. Year after year great incoming waves of ignorance sweep us from ocean to ocean; but I don't forget that those very waves also carry a constantly growing and enlightened class higher and higher toward permanent solidity.

" Every annual wave pushes the flotsam of the year before toward the solid land. The acquaintance with sordid things is the first real impulse toward education. Some day there will be no squalor in the land—neither the physical conditions in our slums nor the arid intellectual deserts within the social frontiers."

" But the waves will accomplish that—not your very worthy novels," said Lacy, impudently.

" If you call me ' worthy ' I'll bat you on the head," roared Westguard, sitting up on the sofa where he had been sprawling; and laughter, loud and long, rattled the windows in the Irish Legation.

The May night was hot; a sickly breeze stirred the curtains at the open windows of Westguard's living room where the Legation was entertaining informally.

Quarren, Lacy, O'Hara, and Sir Charles Mallison sat by the window playing poker; the Earl of Dankmere, perched on the piano-stool, was mournfully rattling off a string of melodies acquired along Broadway; Westguard himself, flat on his back, occupied a leather lounge and dispensed philosophy when permitted.

"You know," said Lacy, dealing rapidly, "you're only a tin-horn philosopher, Karl, but you really could write a good story if you tried. Get your people into action. That's the game."

O'Hara nodded. "Interestin' people, in books and outside, are always doin' things, not talkin'," he said—"like Sir Charles quietly drawin' four cards to a kicker and sayin' nothin'."

"—Like old Dankmere, yonder, playing 'Madame Sherry' and not trying to tell us why human beings enjoy certain sounds known as harmonies, but just keeping busy beating the box——"

"—Like a pretty woman who is contented to be as attractive and cunnin' as she can be, and not stoppin' to explain the anatomy of romantic love and personal beauty," added O'Hara.

"—Like——"

"For Heaven's sake give me a stack of chips and shut up!" shouted Westguard, jumping to his feet and striding to the table. "Everybody on earth is competent to write a book except an author, but I defy anybody to play my poker hands for me! Come on, Dankmere! Let's clean out this complacent crowd!"

Lord Dankmere complied, and seated himself at the

table, anxiously remarking to Quarren that he had come to America to acquire capital, not to spend it. Sir Charles laughed and dealt; Westguard drew five cards, attempted to bluff Quarren's full hand, and was scandalously routed.

Again the cards were dealt and O'Hara bet the limit; and the Earl of Dankmere came back with an agonised burst of chips that scared out Lacy and Sir Charles and left Quarren thinking.

When finally the dust of combat blew clear of the scene Dankmere's stacks were nearly gone, and Quarren's had become symmetrical sky-scrapers.

Lacy said to Dankmere: "Now that you've learned how to get poor quickly you're better prepared for the study of riches and how to acquire 'em. Kindly pass the buck unless your misfortunes have paralysed you."

"The whole country," said his lordship, "is nothing but one gigantic poker game. I sail on the next steamer. I'm bluffed out."

"Poor old Dankmere," purred Lacy, "won't the ladies love you?"

"Their demonstrations," said the Earl, "are not keeping me awake nights."

"Something keeps Quarren awake nights, judging by his transom light. Is it love, Ricky?"

A slight colour mounted to Quarren's thin cheeks, but he answered carelessly: "I read late sometimes. . . . How many cards do you want?"

Sir Charles Mallison turned his head after a moment and looked at Quarren; and meeting his eye, said pleasantly: "I only want one card, Quarren. Please give me the right one."

"Which?"

"The Queen of Hearts."

"Dealer draws one also," said the young fellow.

Sir Charles laid down his hand with a smile:

"Did *you* fill?" he asked Quarren as everybody else remained out.

"I don't mind showing," said Quarren sorting out his cards, faces up.

"Which end?" inquired O'Hara.

"An interior." And he touched the Queen of Hearts, carelessly.

"Crazy playing and lunatic's luck," commented Lacy. "Dankmere, and you, too, Sir Charles, you'd better cut and run for home as fast as your little legs can toddle. Quarren is on the loose."

Sir Charles laughed, glanced at Quarren, then turned to Dankmere.

"It's none of my business," he said, "but if you really are in the devilish financial straits you pretend to be, why don't you square up things and go into trade?"

"Square things?" repeated the little Earl mournfully; "will somebody tell me how? Haven't I been trying out everything? Didn't I back a musical comedy of sorts? Didn't I even do a turn in it myself?"

"That's what probably smashed it," observed O'Hara.

"He did it very well," laughed Sir Charles.

"Dankmere ought to have filled his show full of flossy flappers," insisted Lacy. "Who wants to see an Earl dance and sing? Next time I'll manage the company for you, Dankmere——"

"There'll be no next time," said Dankmere, scanning his cards. "I'm done for," he added, dramatically, letting his own ante go.

"You've lost your nerve," said Quarren, smiling.

"And everything else, my boy!"

"What's the matter with the heiresses, anyway?" inquired O'Hara sympathetically.

"The matter is that I don't want the sort that want me. Somebody's ruined the business in the States. I suppose I might possibly induce a Broadway show-girl——"

The little Earl got up and began to wander around, hands in his pockets, repeating:

"I'd make a pretty good actor, in spite of what O'Hara said. It's the only thing I like anyway. I can improvise songs, too. Listen to this impromptu, you fellows":

And he bent over the piano, still standing, and beat out a jingling accompaniment:

"I sigh for the maiden I never have seen,
I'll make her my countess whatever she's been—
Typewriter, manicure, heiress or queen,
Aged fifty or thirty or lovely eighteen,
Redundant and squatty, or scraggy and lean,
Generous spendthrift or miserly mean—
I sigh for the maiden I never have seen
Provided she's padded with wads of Long Green!"

Still singing the air he picked up a silk hat and walking-stick and began to dance, rather lightly and gracefully, his sunken, heavy-lidded eyes fixed nonchalantly on space—his nimble little feet making no sound on the floor as he swung, swayed, and capered under the electric light timing his agile steps to his own singing.

Loud applause greeted him; much hand-clapping

and cries of "Good old Dankmere! Three cheers for the British peerage!"

Sir Charles looked slightly bored, sitting back in his chair and waiting for the game to recommence. Which it did with the return of the Earl who had now relieved both his intellect and his legs of an accumulated and Terpischorean incubus.

"If I was a bigger ass than I am," said the Earl, "I'd go into vaudeville and let my creditors howl."

"Did they really send you over here?" asked O'Hara, knowing that his lordship made no bones about it.

"They certainly did. And a fine mess I've made of it, haven't I? No decent girl wants me—though why, I don't know, because I'm decent enough as men go. But your newspapers make fun of me and my title—and I might as well cut away to Dankmere Tarns and let 'em pick my carcass clean."

"What's Dankmere Tarns?" asked O'Hara.

"Mine, except the mortgages on it."

"Entailed?"

"Naturally."

"Kept up?"

"No, shut up."

"What sort of a gallery is that of yours at Dankmere Tarns?" inquired Sir Charles, turning around.

"How the devil do I know," replied his lordship fretfully. "I don't know anything about pictures."

"Are there not some very valuable ones there?"

"There are a lot of very dirty ones."

"Don't you know their value?"

"No, I don't. But I fancy the good ones were sold off long ago—twenty years ago I believe. There was

a sale—a lot of rubbish of sorts. I took it for granted that Lister's people cleaned out everything worth taking."

"When you go back," said Sir Charles, "inspect that rubbish again. Perhaps Lister's people overlooked enough to get you out of your financial difficulties. Pictures that sold for £100 twenty years ago might bring £1,000 to-day. It's merely a suggestion, Dankmere—if you'll pardon it."

"And a good one," added O'Hara. "I know a lot of interestin' people and they tell me that you can sell any rotten old picture over here for any amount of money. Sting 'em, Dankmere. Get to 'em!"

"You might send for some of your pictures," said Lacy, "and have a shot at the auction-mad amateur. He's too easy."

"And pay duty and storage and gallery hire and auction fees!—no, thanks," replied the little Earl, cautiously. "I've burnt my bally fingers too often in schemes."

"I've a back room behind my office," said Quarren. "You can store them there if you like, without charge."

"Besides, if they're genuine, there will be no duty to pay," explained Sir Charles.

Dankmere sucked on his cigar but made no comment; and the game went on, disastrously for him.

Quarren said casually to Sir Charles:

"I suppose you will be off to Newport, soon."

"To-morrow. When do you leave town?"

"I expect to remain in town nearly all summer."

"Isn't that rather hard?"

"No; it doesn't matter much," said the boy indifferently.

"Many people are already on the wing," observed Lacy.

"The Calderas have gone, I hear, and the Vernons and Mrs. Sprowl," added O'Hara.

"I suppose the Wycherlys will open Witch-Hollow in June," said Quarren carelessly.

"Yes. Are you asked?"

"No."

"Doubtless you will be," said Sir Charles. "Jim Wycherly is mad about aviation and several men are going to send their biplanes up and try 'em out."

"I'm goin'," announced O'Hara.

Quarren drew one card, and filled his house. Sir Charles laid aside his useless hand with a smile and turned to Quarren:

"Mrs. Leeds has spoken so often and so pleasantly of you that I have been rather hoping I might some day have the opportunity of knowing you better. I am very glad that the Legation asked me to-night."

Quarren remained absolutely still for a few moments. Then he said:

"Mrs. Leeds is very generous in her estimate of me."

"She is a woman of rare qualities."

"Of unusual qualities and rare charm," said Quarren coolly. . . . "I think, Karl, that I'll make it ten more to draw cards. Are you all staying in?"

Before the party broke up—and it was an early one—Lord Dankmere turned to Quarren.

"I'll drop in at your office, if I may, some morning," he said. "May I?"

"It will give me both pleasure and diversion," said Quarren laughing. "There is not enough business in

my office to afford me either. Also you are welcome to send for those pictures and store them in my back parlour until you can find a purchaser."

"It's an idea, isn't it?" mused his lordship. "Now I don't suppose you happen to know anything about such rubbish, do you?—pictures and that sort. What?"

"Why—yes—I do, in a way."

"The devil you do! But then I've always been told that you know something about everything——"

"Very, very little," said Quarren, laughing. "In an ignorant world smatterings are reverenced. But the fashionable Philistine of yesterday, who used to boast of his ignorance regarding things artistic and intellectual, is becoming a little ashamed of his ignorance——"

Dankmere, reddening, said bluntly:

"That applies to me; doesn't it?"

"I beg your pardon!—I didn't mean it that way——"

"You're right, anyway. I'm damnably ignorant. . . . See here, Quarren, if I send over for some of those pictures of mine, will you give me your opinion like a good fellow before I make a bally ass of myself by offering probable trash to educated people?"

"I'll tell you all I know about your pictures, if that is what you mean," said Quarren, much amused.

They shook hands as Sir Charles came up to make his adieux.

"Good-bye," he said to Quarren. "I'm off to Newport to-morrow. And—I—I promised to ask you to come with me."

"Where?"

"Mrs. Sprowl told me to bring you. You know how informal she is."

Quarren, surprised, glanced sharply at Sir Charles. "I don't believe she really wants me," he said.

"If she didn't she wouldn't have made me promise to bring you. She's that sort, you know. Won't you come? I am sure that Mrs. Leeds, also, would be glad to see you."

Quarren looked him coolly and unpleasantly in the eyes.

"Do you really believe that?" he asked, almost insolently.

Sir Charles reddened:

"She asked me to say so to you. I heard from her this morning; and I have fulfilled her request."

"Thank her for me," returned Quarren, level-eyed and very white.

"Which means?" insisted Sir Charles quietly.

"Absolutely nothing," said Quarren in a voice which makes enemies.

The following day Sir Charles left for Newport where Mrs. Sprowl had opened "Skyland," her villa of pink Tennessee marble, to a lively party of young people of which Strelsa Leeds made one. And once more, according to the newspapers, her engagement to Sir Charles was expected to be announced at any moment.

When Quarren picked up the newspapers from his office desk next morning he found the whole story there —a story to which he had become accustomed.

But the next day, the papers repeated the news. And it remained, for the first time, uncontradicted by

"Once more, according to the newspapers, her engagement to Sir Charles was expected to be announced."

anybody. All that morning he sat at his desk staring at her picture, reproduced in half-tones on the first page of every newspaper in town—stared at it, and at the neighbouring likeness of Sir Charles in the uniform of his late regiment; read once more of Strelsa's first marriage with all its sequence of misery and degradation; read fulsome columns celebrating her beauty, her popularity, her expected engagement to one of the wealthiest Englishmen in the world.

He read, also, all about Sir Charles Mallison, V.C.—the long record of his military service, his wealth and the dignified simplicity of his life. He read about his immense popularity in England, his vast but unostentatious charities, his political and social status.

To Quarren it all meant nothing more definite than a stupid sequence of printed words; and he dropped his blond head into both hands and gazed out into the sunshine. And presently he remembered the golden dancer laughing at him from under her dainty mask—years and years ago: and then he thought of the woman whose smooth young hands once seemed to melt so sweetly against his—thought of her gray eyes tinged with violet, and her hair and mouth and throat—and her cheek faintly fragrant against his—a moment's miracle—and then, the end——

He made a quick, aimless movement as though impatiently escaping sudden pain; cleared his sun-dazzled eyes and began, half blindly, to turn over his morning's letters—circulars, bills, business matters—and suddenly came upon a letter from her.

For a while he merely gazed at it, incredulous of its reality.

Then he opened the envelope very deliberately and still, scarcely convinced, unfolded the scented sheaf of note-paper:

"DEAR MR. QUARREN,

"At Mrs. Sprowl's suggestion I wrote to Sir Charles asking him to be kind enough to bring you with him when he came to 'Skyland.'

"Somehow, I am afraid that my informality may have offended you; and if this is so, I am sorry. We have been such good friends that I supposed I might venture to send you such a message.

"But perhaps I ought to have written it to you instead—I don't know. Lately it seems as though many things that I have done have been entirely misunderstood.

"It's gray weather here, and the sea looks as though it were bad-tempered; and I've been rather discontented, too, this morning——

"I don't really mean that. There is a very jolly party here. . . . I believe that I'm growing a little tired of parties.

"Molly has asked me to Witch-Hollow for a quiet week in June, and I'm going. She would ask you if I suggested it. Shall I? Because, since we last met, once or twice the thought has occurred to me that perhaps an explanation was overdue. Not that I should make any to you if you and I meet at Witch-Hollow. There isn't any to make—except by my saying that I hope to see you again. Will you be content with that admission of guilt?

"I meant to speak to you again that day at the Charity affair, only there were so many people bother-

ing—and you seemed to be so delightfully preoccupied with that pretty Cyrille Caldera. I really had no decent opportunity to speak to you again without making her my mortal enemy—and you, too, perhaps.

"May I dare to be a little friendly now and say that I would like to see you? Somehow I feel that even still I may venture to talk to you on a different plane and footing from any which exists between other men and me. You were once so friendly, so kind, so nice to me. You have been nice—*always*. And if I seem to have acquired any of the hardness, any of the cynical veneer, any of the fashionable scepticism and unbelief which, perhaps, no woman entirely escapes in my environment, it all softens and relaxes and fades and seems to slip away as soon as I begin to talk to you—even on this note-paper. Which is only one way of saying, 'Please be my friend again!'

"I sometimes hear about you from others. I am impressively informed that you have given up all frivolous social activity and are now most industriously devoting yourself to your real-estate business. And I am wondering whether this rather bewildering *volte-face* is to be permanent.

"Because I see no reason for anybody going to extremes. Between the hermit's cell and the Palace of Delights there is a quiet and happy country. Don't you know that?

"Would you care to write to me and tell me a little about yourself? Do you think it odd or capricious of me to write to you? And are you perhaps irritated because of my manners which must have seemed to you discourteous—perhaps rude?

"I know of course that you called on me; that you

telephoned; that you wrote to me; and that I made no response.

"And I am going to make no explanation. Can your friendship, or what may remain of it, stand the strain?

"If it can, please write to me. And forgive me whatever injustice I have seemed to do you. I ask it because, although you may not believe it, my regard for you has never become less since the night that a Harlequin and a golden dancer met in the noisy halls of old King Carnival. . . . Only, the girl who writes you this was younger and happier then than I think she ever will be again.

"Your friend—if you wish—

"STRELSA LEEDS."

He wrote her by return mail:

"MY DEAR MRS. LEEDS,

"When a man has made up his mind to drown without any more fuss, it hurts him to be hauled out and resuscitated and told that he is still alive.

"If you mean, ultimately, to let me drown, do it now. I've been too miserable over you. Also, I was insulting to Sir Charles. He's too decent to have told you; but I was. And I can't ask his pardon except by mending my manner toward him in future.

"I'm a nobody; I haven't any money; and I love you. That is how the matter stands this day in May. Let me know the worst and I'll drown this time for good and all.

"Are you engaged to marry Sir Charles?

"R. S. QUARREN."

By return mail came a note from her:

"Can you not care for me and still be kind to me, Mr. Quarren? If what you say about your regard for me is true—but it is certainly exaggerated, anyway—should not your attitude toward me include a nobler sentiment? I mean friendship. And I know whereof I speak, because I am conscious of a capacity for it—a desire for it—and for you as the object of it. I believe that, if you cared for it, I could give you the very best of me in a friendship of the highest type.

"It is in me to give it—a pure, devoted, lofty, untroubled friendship, absolutely free of lesser and material sentiments. Am I sufficiently frank? I want such a friendship. I need it. I have never before offered it to any man—the kind I mean to give you if you wish.

"I believe it would satisfy you; I am convinced that yours would satisfy me. You don't know how I have missed such a friendship in you. I have wanted it from the very beginning of our acquaintance. But I had—problems—to solve, first; and I had to let our friendship lie dormant. Now I have solved my perplexities, and all my leisure is for you again, if you will. Do you want it?

"Think over what I have written. Keep my letter for a week and then write me. Does my offer not deserve a week's consideration?

"Meanwhile please keep away from deep water. I do not wish you to drown.

"STRELSA LEEDS.

"P. S.—Lord Dankmere is here. He is insufferable. He told Mrs. Sprowl that you and he were going into the antique-picture business. You wouldn't think of

going into anything whatever with a man of that sort, would you? Or was it merely a British jest?"

He wrote at once:

"I have your letter and will keep it a week before replying. But—are you engaged?"

She answered:

"The papers have had me engaged to Barent Van Dyne, to Langly Sprowl, to Sir Charles. You may take your choice if you are determined to have me engaged to somebody. No doubt you think my being engaged would make our future friendship safer. I'll attend to it immediately if you wish me to."

Evidently she was in a gay and contrary humour when she wrote so flippantly to him. And he replied in kind and quite as lightly. Then, at the week's end he wrote her again that he had considered her letter, and that he accepted the friendship she offered, and gave her his in return.

She did not reply.

He wrote her again a week later, but had no answer. Another week passed, and, slowly into his senses crept the dread of deep waters closing around him. And after another week he began to wonder, dully, how long it would take a man to drown if he made no struggle.

Meanwhile several dozen crates and packing cases had arrived at the Custom House for the Earl of Dankmere; and, in process of time were delivered at the real-estate office of R. S. Quarren, littering his sleeping quarters and office and overflowing into the extension and backyard.

"All stacked up pell-mell in the back yard and regarded in amazement by the neighbours."

It was the first of June and ordinarily hot when Lord Dankmere and Quarren, stripped to their shirts and armed with pincers, chisels and hammers, attacked the packing cases in the backyard, observed from the back fences by several astonished cats.

His lordship was not expert at manual labour; neither was Quarren; and some little blood was shed from the azure veins of Dankmere and the ruddier integument of the younger man as picture after picture emerged from its crate, some heavily framed, some merely sagging on their ancient un-keyed stretchers.

There were primitives on panels, triptychs, huge canvases in frames carved out of solid wood; pictures in battered Italian frames—some floridly Florentine, some exquisitely inlaid on dull azure and rose—pictures in Spanish frames, Dutch frames, English frames, French frames of the last century; portraits, landscapes, genre, still life—battle pictures, religious subjects, allegorical canvases, mythological—all stacked up pell-mell in the backyard and regarded in amazement by the neighbours, and by two young men who alternately smoked and staunched their wounds under the summer sky.

"Dankmere," said Quarren at last, "did your people send over your entire collection?"

"No; but I thought it might be as well to have plenty of rubbish on hand in case a demand should spring up. . . . What do they look like to you, Quarren—I mean what's your first impression?"

"They look all right."

"Really?"

"Certainly. They seem to be genuine enough as far as I can see."

"But are they otherwise any good?"

"I think so. I'll go over each canvas very carefully and give you my opinion for what it's worth. But, for Heaven's sake, Dankmere, where are we going to put all these canvases?"

"I suppose," said the Earl gloomily, "I'll be obliged to store what you haven't room for. And as I gradually grow poorer and poorer the day will arrive when I can't pay storage; and they'll sell 'em under my nose at auction, Quarren. And first I know the papers will blossom out with: 'A Wonderful Rembrandt discovered in a junk-shop! Ancient picture bought for five dollars and pronounced a gem by experts! Lucky purchaser refuses a hundred thousand dollars cash!'"

Quarren laughed and turned away into the house; and Dankmere followed, gloomily predicting his own approaching financial annihilation.

From his office Quarren telephoned a picture dealer to send men with heavy wire, hooks, ladders and other paraphernalia; then he and Dankmere made their toilets, resumed their coats, and returned to the sunny office to await events.

After a few moments the Earl said abruptly:

"Would you care to go into this venture with me, Quarren?"

"I?" said Quarren, surprised.

"Yes. Will you?"

"Why, I have my own business, Dankmere——"

"Is it enough to keep you busy?"

"No—not yet—but I——"

"Then, like a good fellow, help me sell these damned pictures. I haven't any money to offer you, Quarren, but if you'll be willing to hang the pictures around your

office here and in the back parlour and the extension, and if you'll talk the merry talk to the lunatics who may come in to look at 'em and tell 'em what the bally pictures are and fix the proper prices—why—why, I'll make any arrangement with you that you please. Say a half interest, now. Would that be fair?"

"Fair? Of course! It's far too liberal an offer—but I——"

"It's worth that to me, Quarren—if you can see your way to helping me out——"

"But my help isn't worth half what these pictures might very easily bring—even at public auction——"

"Why not? I'd have to pay an auctioneer, an expert to appraise them—an art dealer to hang them in his gallery for a couple of weeks—either that or rent a place by the year. The only way I can recompense you for your wall space, for talking art talk to visitors, for fixing prices, is to offer you half of what we make. Why not? You pay a pretty stiff rent here, don't you? You also pay a servant. You pay for heat and light, don't you? So if you'll turn this floor into a combination gallery of sorts—art and real estate, you see—we'll go into business, egad! What? The Dankmere galleries! What? By gad I'll have a sign made to hang out there beside your shingle—only I'm afraid you'll have to pay for it, Quarren, and recompense yourself after we sell the first picture."

"But, Dankmere," he protested, very much amused, "I don't want to become a picture dealer."

"What's the harm? Take a shot at it, old chap! A young man can't collect too many kinds of experience. Take me for example!—I've sold dogs and hunters on commission, gone shares in about every rotten

scheme anybody ever suggested to me, financed a show, and acted in it—as you know—and, by gad!—here I am now a dealer in old masters! Be a good fellow and come in with me. What?"

"I don't really know enough about antique pictures to——"

"What's the odds! Neither do I! My dear sir, we must lie like gentlemen for the honour of the Dankmere gallery! What? Along comes a chap walking slowly and painfully for the weight of the money in his pockets—'Ho!' says he—'a genuine Van Dyck!' 'Certainly,' you say, very coldly. And, 'How much?' says he, shivering for fear he mayn't get it. 'Three hundred thousand dollars,' you say, trying not to yawn in his face——"

Quarren could no longer control his laughter: Dankmere blinked at him amiably.

"We'll hang them anyhow, Dankmere," he said. "As long as there is so little business in the office I don't mind looking after your pictures for you——"

"Yours, too," urged the Earl.

"No; I can't accept anything——"

"Then it's all off!" exclaimed Dankmere, turning a bright red. "I'm blessed if I'll accept charity!—even if I am hunting heiresses. I'll marry money if I can, but I'm damned if I hold out a tin cup for coppers!"

"If you feel that way," began Quarren, very much embarrassed, "I'll do whatever would make you feel comfortable——"

"Half interest or it's all off! A Dankmere means what he says—now and then."

"One-third interest, then——"

"A half!—by gad! There's a good fellow!"

"No; one-third is all I'll accept."

"Oh, very well. It may amount to ten dollars—it may amount to ten thousand—and ten times that, perhaps. What?"

"Perhaps," said Quarren, smiling. "And, if you're going out, Dankmere, perhaps you had better order a sign painted—anything you like, of course. Because I'm afraid I couldn't leave these pictures here indefinitely and we might as well make plans to get rid of some of them as soon as possible."

"Right-o! I'm off to find a painter. Leave it to me, Quarren. And when the picture-hangers come, have them hung in a poor light—I mean the pictures—God knows they need it—the dimmer the light the better. What? Take care of yourself, old chap. There's money in sight, believe me!"

And the lively little Earl trotted out, swinging his stick and setting his straw hat at an angle slightly rakish.

No business came to the office that sunny afternoon; neither did the picture-hangers. And Quarren, uneasy, and not caring to leave Dankmere's ancestral collection of pictures in the back yard all night lest the cats and a possible shower knock a little superfluous antiquity into them, had just started to go out and hire somebody to help him carry the canvases into the basement, when the office door opened in his very face and Molly Wycherly came in, breezily.

"Why, Molly!" he exclaimed, surprised; "this is exceedingly nice of you——"

"Oh, Ricky, I'm glad to see you! But I don't want to buy a house or sell one or anything. I'm very unhappy—and I'm glad to see you——"

She pressed his hand with both her gloved ones; he closed the door and returned to the office; and she seated herself on top of his desk.

"You dear boy," she said; "you are thin and white and you don't look very happy either. Are you?"

"Why, of course I'm happy——"

"I don't believe it! Anyway, I was passing, and I saw your shingle swinging, and I made the chauffeur stop on the impulse of the moment. . . . How are you, Ricky dear?"

"First rate. You are even unusually pretty, Molly."

"I don't feel so. Strelsa and I came into town for the afternoon—on the most horrid kind of business, Ricky."

"I'm sorry——"

"You will be sorrier when you hear that about all of Strelsa's money was in that miserable Adamant Trust Company which is causing so much scandal. You didn't know Strelsa's money was in it, did you?"

"No," he said gravely.

"Isn't it dreadful? The child doesn't know whether she will ever get a penny or not. Some of those disgusting men have run away, one shot himself—you read about it!—and now they are trying to pretend that the two creatures they have arrested are insane and irresponsible. I don't care whether they are or not; I'd like to kill them. How does their insanity concern Strelsa? For three weeks she hasn't known what to think, what to expect—and even her lawyers can't tell her. I hate lawyers. But *I* think the chances are that her pretty house will be for sale before long. . . . Wouldn't it be too tragic if it came into your office——"

"Don't say such things, Molly," he said, bending his head over the desk and fumbling with his pen.

"Well, I knew you'd be sympathetic. It's a shame —a crime!—it's absolutely disgusting the way that men gamble with other people's money and cheat and lie and —and—oh, it's a perfectly rotten world and I'm tired of it!"

"Where is Mrs. Leeds?" he asked in a low voice.

"At Witch-Hollow—in town for this afternoon to see her stupid lawyers. They don't do anything. They say they can't just yet. They're lazy or—something worse. That's my opinion. We go out on the five-three train—Strelsa and I——"

"Is she—much affected?"

"No; and that's the silly part of it. It would simply wreck me. But she hasn't wept a single tear. . . . I suppose she'll have to marry, now—" Mrs. Wycherly glanced askance at Quarren, but his face remained gravely expressionless.

"Ricky dear?"

"Yes."

"I had a frightful row, on your account, with Mrs. Sprowl."

"I'm sorry. Why?"

"I told her I was going to ask you and Strelsa to Witch-Hollow."

Quarren said calmly:

"Don't do it then, Molly. There's no use of your getting in wrong with Mrs. Sprowl."

Mrs. Wycherly laughed:

"Oh, I found a way around. I asked Mrs. Sprowl and Sir Charles at the same time."

"What do you mean?" he said, turning a colourless face to hers.

"What I say. Ricky dear, I suppose that Strelsa *will* have to marry a wealthy man, now—and I believe she realises it, too—but I—I *wanted* her to marry you, some day——"

He swung around again, confronting her.

"You darling!" he said under his breath.

Mrs. Wycherly's lip trembled and she dabbed at her eyes.

"I wish I could express my feelings like Mrs. Sprowl, but I can't," she said naïvely. "Sir Charles will marry her, now; I know perfectly well he will—unless Langly Sprowl——"

Quarren drew his breath sharply.

"Not that man," she said.

"God knows, Ricky. He's after Strelsa every minute—and he *can* make himself agreeable. The worst of it is that Strelsa does not believe what she hears about him. Women are that way, often. The moment the whole world pitches into a man, women are inclined to believe him a martyr—and end by discrediting every unworthy story concerning him. . . . I don't know, but I think it is already a little that way with Strelsa. . . . He's a clever brute—and oh! what a remorseless man! . . . I said that once to Strelsa, and she said very warmly that I entirely misjudged him. . . . I wish Mary Ledwith would come back and bring things to a crisis—I do, indeed."

Quarren said, calmly;

"You don't think Mrs. Leeds is engaged to Sprowl, do you?"

"No. . . . I don't think so. Sometimes I don't know

what to think of Strelsa. I'm certain that she was not engaged to him four weeks ago when she was at Newport."

Quarren gazed out into the sunlit street. It was just four weeks ago that her letters ceased. Had she stopped writing because of worry over the Adamant Trust? Or was there another reason?

"I suppose," said Molly, dabbing at her eyes, "that Strelsa can't pick and choose now. I suppose she's got to marry for sordid and sensible and material reasons. But if only she would choose Sir Charles—I think I could be almost reconciled to her losing you——"

Quarren laughed harshly.

"An irreparable loss to any woman," he said. "I doubt that Mrs. Leeds survives losing me."

"Ricky! She cares a great deal for you! So do I. And Strelsa *does* care for you——"

"Not too rashly I hope," he said with another disagreeable laugh.

"Oh, that isn't like you, Ricky! You're not the sneering, fleering nasty kind. If you are badly hurt, take it better than that——"

"I can't!" he said between set teeth. "I care for her; she knows it. I guess she knows, too, that what she once said to me started me into what I'm doing now—working, waiting, living like a dog—doing my best to keep my self-respect and obtain hers—" He choked, regained his self-control, and went on quietly:

"Why do you think I dropped out of everything? To try to develop whatever may be in me—so that I could speak to her as an equal and not as the court jester and favourite mountebank of the degenerate gang she travels with——"

"Ricky!"

"I beg your pardon," he said sullenly.

"I am not offended, you poor boy. . . . I hadn't realised that you were so much in love with her—so deeply concerned——"

"I have always been. . . . She knows it. . . ." He cleared his eyes and turned a dazed gaze on the sunny street once more.

"If I could—" he stopped; a hopeless look came into his eyes. Then he slowly shook his head.

"Oh, Ricky! Ricky! Can't you do something? Can't you make a lot of money very quickly? You see Strelsa has simply got to marry money. Be fair; be just to her. A girl can't exist without money, can she? You know that, don't you?"

"I've heard your world say so."

"You know it's true!"

"I don't know what is true. I don't know truth from falsehood. I suppose that love requires money to keep it nourished—as roses require manure——"

"Ricky!"

"I'm speaking of *your* world——"

"My world! The entire world knows that money is necessary—except perhaps a silly sentimentalist here and there——"

"Yes, there are one or two—here and there," he said. "But they're all poor—and prejudiced."

Molly applied her handkerchief to her eyes, viciously.

"I hope *you* are not one, Ricky. I'm sure I'm not fool enough to expect a girl who has been accustomed to everything to be contented without anything."

"There's her husband as an asset."

"Oh, my dear, don't talk slush!"

"—And—children—perhaps."

"And no money to educate them! You dear boy, there is nothing to do—absolutely nothing—unless it's based on money. You know it; I know it. People without it are intolerable—a nuisance to everybody and to themselves. What could Strelsa find in life without the means to enjoy it?"

"Nothing—perhaps. . . . But I believe I'll ask her."

"She'll tell you the truth, Ricky. She's an unusually truthful woman. . . . I must go downtown. Strelsa and I are lunching"—she reddened—"with Langly. . . . His aunt would kill me if she heard of it. . . . I positively do not dare ask Langly to Witch-Hollow because I'm so deadly afraid of that fat old woman! . . . Besides, I don't want him there—although—if Strelsa *has* to marry him——"

She fell silent and thoughtful, reflecting, perhaps, that if Strelsa was going to take Langly Sprowl, her own country house might as well have the benefit of any fashionable and social glamour incident to the announcement.

Then, glancing at Quarren, her heart smote her, and she flushed:

"Come up to Witch-Hollow, Ricky dear, and get her to elope with you if you can! Will you?"

"I'll come to Witch-Hollow if you ask me."

"That's ducky of you. You *are* a good sport, Ricky—and always were! Go on and marry her if you can. Other women have stood it. . . . And, I know it's vulgar and low and catty of me—but I'd love to see Mrs. Sprowl blow up—and see that hatchet-faced Langly

disappointed—yes, I would, and I don't care what you think! Their ancestors were common people, and Heaven knows why a Wycherly of Wycherly should be afraid of the descendants of Dutch rum smugglers!"

Quarren looked up with a weary smile.

"But you are afraid," he said.

"I am," admitted Molly, furiously; and marched out.

As he put her into her car he said:

"Write me if you don't change your mind about asking me to Witch-Hollow."

"No fear," said the pretty little woman; "and," she added, "I hope you make mischief and raise the very dickens all around. I sincerely hope you do!"

"I hope so, too," he said with the ghost of a smile.

"A fortnight later Strelsa wrote to Quarren for the first time in nearly two months."

CHAPTER VIII

A FORTNIGHT later Strelsa wrote to Quarren for the first time in nearly two months.

"DEAR MR. QUARREN,

"Molly says that she saw you in town two weeks ago, and that she told you how unexpectedly my worldly affairs have altered since I last wrote to you.

"For me, somehow or other, life has been always a sequence of abrupt experiences—a series of extremes—one grotesque exaggeration after another, and all diametrically opposed. And it seems odd that such radically material transformations should so ruthlessly disturb and finally, now, end by completely altering the character of a girl whose real nature is—or was—unaccented and serene to the verge of indifference. For the woman writing this is very different from the one you knew as Strelsa Leeds.

"I am not yet sure what the outcome of this Adamant affair will be. Neither, apparently, are my attorneys. But it is absolutely certain that if I ever recover anything at all, it will not amount to very much—not nearly enough to live on.

"When they first brought the unpleasant news to me my instinct was to sit down and write you about it. I was horribly scared, and wanted you to know it.

"I didn't yield to the impulse as you know—I can-

not give you the reasons why. They were merely intuitions at first; later they became reasons as my financial situation developed in all its annoying proportions.

"I can tell you only this: before material disaster threatened me out of a clear sky, supposing that matters would always remain with me as they were—that I should never know any serious want, never apprehend actual necessity—I had made up my mind to a course of life which now has become impossible.

"It was not, perhaps, a very admirable plan of existence that I had conceived for myself, nothing radical or original. I meant, merely, *not* to marry, to live well within my income, to divide my time between my friends and myself—that is to give myself more leisure for self-development, tranquil cultivation, and a wider and more serious interest in things worthy.

"If by dividing my time between my friends and myself I was to lose touch more or less with the lively and rather exacting society in which I live, I had decided on the sacrifice.

"And that, Mr. Quarren, is how matters stood with me until a month ago.

"Now everything is altered—even my own character I think. There is in me very little courage—and, alas, much of that cowardice which shrinks from pain and privation of any kind—which cringes the more basely, perhaps, because there has been, in my life, so much of sorrow, so little of material ease and tranquillity of mind.

"I had been dreaming of a balanced and secure life with leisure to develop mental resources hitherto neglected. And your friendship—our new understanding—meant much of that part of life for me—more

than I realised—far more than you do. Can you understand how deep the hurt is?—deeper because now you will learn what a coward I really am and how selfishly I surrender to the menace of material destruction. I am in dire terror of it; I simply do not choose to endure it. That I need not submit to it, inspires in me the low type of equanimity that enables me to face the future with apparent courage. My world applauds it as pluck. I have confessed to you what it really is.

"Now you know me, Mr. Quarren—a preacher of lofty ideals while prosperous, a recreant in adversity.

"I thought once that the most ignoble sentiments ever entertained by man were those lesser and physical emotions which, in the world, masquerade as love—or as an essential part of it. To me they always seemed intolerable as any part of love, material, unworthy, base. To me love was intellectual—could be nothing less lofty —and should aspire to the spiritual.

"I say this because you once tried to make me understand that you loved me.

"Marriage of two minds with nothing material to sully an ideal union was what I had dreamed of. I might have cared for you that way when a marriage tainted with lesser emotions repelled me. And now, like all iconoclasts, I end by shattering my own complacent image, and the fragments have fallen to the lowest depth of all.

"For I contemplate a mariage de convenance—and I scarcely care whom I marry as long as he removes from me this terror of a sordid and needy future.

"All ideals, all desire for higher and better things—for a noble leisure and the quiet pleasures of self-development, have gone—vanished utterly. Fear sickens

me night and day—the same dull dread that I have known so many, many years in my life—a blind horror of more unhappiness and pain after two years of silence—that breathless stillness which frightened wounded things know while they lie, panting, dazed listening for the coming footsteps of that remorseless Fate which struck them down from afar.

"I tell you this, Mr. Quarren, because it is due to you if you really love me—or if you once did love me—because when you have read this you will no longer care for me.

"One evening you made me understand that you cared for me; and I replied to you only by a dazed silence that neither you nor I entirely understood at the time. It was not contempt for you—yet, perhaps, I could not really have cared very deeply for such a man as you then seemed to be. It was not intellectual indifference that silenced me. . . . And I can say no more about it—except that—something—changed me radically from that moment—and ever since I have been trying to understand myself—to learn something about myself—and of the world I live in—and of men.

"When a crisis arrives self-revelation comes in a single flash. My financial crisis arrived as you know; I suddenly saw myself as I am—a woman astonishingly undeveloped and ignorant in many ways, crude, unawakened, stupid—a woman half-blinded with an unreasoning dread of more pain—pain which she thought had at last been left behind her—and a coward all through; and selfish from head to heel.

"This is what I *really* am. And I shall prove it by marrying for reasons entirely material, because I have no courage to ever again face adversity and unhappiness.

"'I say, Quarren—does this old lady hang

next to the battered party in black?'"

"You will not care to write to me; and you will not care to see me again.

"I am glad you once cared for me. If you should ever reply to this letter, don't be very unkind to me. I know what I am—and I vaguely surmise what I shall lose by being so. But I have no courage for anything else.

"STRELSA LEEDS."

That was the letter she wrote to Quarren; and he read it standing by his desk while several noisy workmen were covering every available inch of his walls with Dankmere's family pictures, and the little Earl himself, whistling a lively air, trotted about superintending everything with all the cheerful self-confidence of a family dog regulating everything that goes on in his vicinity.

"I say, Quarren—does this old lady hang next to the battered party in black?" he demanded briskly.

Quarren looked around; "Yes," he said, "they're both by Nicholas Maas according to your list."

"*I* think they're bally fakes," remarked the Earl, "don't you?"

"We'll try to find out," said Quarren, absently.

Dankmere puffed away on his cigar and consulted his list: "Reynolds (Sir Joshua). Portrait of Lady Dankmere," he read; "portrait of Sir Boggs Dankmere!—string 'em up aloft over that jolly little lady with no frock on!—Rembrandt (Van Rijn). Born near Leyden, July 15th, 1607—Oh, who cares as long as it *is* a Rembrandt!—Is it, Quarren? It isn't a copy, is it?"

"I hope not," said the young fellow absently.

"Egad! So do I." And to the workmen—"Phile-

mon and Baucis by Rembrandt! Hang 'em up next to that Romney—over the Jan Steen . . . Quarren?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think that St. Michael's Mount is a real Turner?"

"It looks like it. I can't express opinions off-hand, Dankmere."

"I can," said the little Earl; "and I say that if that *is* a Turner I can beat it myself working with tomato catsup, an underdone omelette, and a clothes-brush. . . . Hello! I like this picture. The list calls it a Watteau —'The Fête Champêtre.' What do you know about it, Quarren?"

"Nothing yet. It seems to be genuine enough."

"And this pretty girl by Boucher?"

"I tell you, Dankmere, that I don't know. They all appear to be genuine, after a superficial examination. It takes time to be sure about any picture—and if we're going to be certain it will require confabs with authorities—restorers, dealers, experts, curators from various museums—all sorts and conditions of people must be approached and warily consulted—and paid," he added smiling. "And that has to be done with circumspection because some are not honest and we don't want anybody to get the impression that we are attempting to bribe anybody for a favourable verdict."

A few minutes later he went across the street and telegraphed to Molly Wycherly:

"May I remind you that you asked me to Witch-Hollow?

QUARREN."

The following morning after the workmen had departed, he and Dankmere stood contemplating the trans-

formations wrought in the office, back parlour, and extension of Quarren's floor in the shabby old Lexington Avenue house.

The transformation was complete; all woodwork had been painted white, a gray-green paper hung on the walls, the floor stained dark brown and covered with several antique rugs which had come with the pictures —a Fereghan, a Ladik, and an ancient Herez with rose and sapphire lights in it.

At the end of the suite hung another relic of Dankmere Tarns—a Gobelins tapestry about ten by twelve, signed by Audran, the subject of which was Boucher's "Venus, Mars, and Vulcan" from the picture in the Wallace Collection. Opposite it was suspended an old Persian carpet of the sixteenth century—a magnificent Dankmere heirloom woven in the golden age of ancient Eastern art and displaying amid the soft splendour of its matchless hues the strange and exquisitely arched cloud-forms traced in forgotten dyes amid a wilderness of delicate flowers and vines.

Between these two fabrics, filling the walls from base-board to ceiling, were ranged Dankmere's pictures. Few traces of the real-estate office remained—merely a desk, letter-file, a shelf piled up with maps, and Quarren's shingle outside; but this was now overshadowed by the severely magnificent sign:

THE DANKMERE GALLERY
OF
OLD MASTERS
ALGERNON FAYRE, R. S. QUARREN & CO.

For Lord Dankmere, otherwise Algernon Cecil Clarence Fayre, Earl of Dankmere, had decided to dedicate to trade only a portion of his aristocratic appellations. As for the company, it consisted of Quarren's cat, Daisy, and her litter of unweaned kittens.

"Do you realise," said Quarren, dropping into the depths of a new easy-chair, "that you have almost put me out of business?"

"Well, you weren't in very deeply, you know," commented Dankmere.

"No; but last week I went to bed a broker in real estate; and this week I wake up a picture dealer and your partner. It's going to take most of my time. I can't sell a picture unless I know what it is. I've got to find out—or try to. Do you know what that means?"

"I fancy it means chucking your real estate," said Dankmere, imperturbably. "Why not? This is a better gamble. And if we make anything we ought to make something worth while."

"Do you propose that I shall simply drop my entire business—close up everything and go into this thing permanently?" demanded Quarren.

"It will come to that, ultimately. Don't you want to?"

From the beginning Quarren had felt, vaguely, that it would come to that—realised instinctively that in such an enterprise he would be on solid ground—that the idea was pleasant to him—that his tastes fitted him for such an occupation. Experience was lacking, but, somehow, his ignorance did not dismay him.

All his life he had cared for such things, been familiar with them, been curious to learn more, had read enough to understand something of the fascinating

problems now confronting him, had, in his hours of leisure, familiarised himself with the best of art in the public and private galleries of the city.

More than that a natural inclination and curiosity had led him among dealers, restorers, brokers of pictures. He knew them all from Fifth Avenue to Lexington, the celebrated and the obscure; he had heard them talk, heard the gossip and scandal of their curious world, watched them buying, selling, restoring, relining, reframing; listened to their discussions concerning their art and the art in which they dealt. And it had always fascinated him although, until Dankmere arrived, it had never occurred to him to make a living out of a heterogeneous mass of partly assimilated knowledge acquired from the sheer love of the subject.

Fortunate the man whose means of livelihood is also his pleasure! Deep in his heart lies the unconscious contentment of certainty.

And somehow, with the advent of Dankmere's pictures, into Quarren's troubled heart had come a vague sensation of ease—a cessation of the old anxiety and unrest—a quiet that he had never before known.

To learn what his wares really were seemed no formidable task; to appreciate and appraise each one only little labours of love. Every problem appeared to him as a separate attraction; the disposal of his stock a delightful and leisurely certainty because he himself would be certain of what he dealt in.

Then, too, his mind had long since invaded a future which day by day grew more alluring in its suggestions. He himself would learn the practical and manual art of restoration—learn how to clean, reline, revarnish; how to identify, how to dissect. Every thread of an

ancient canvas should tell him a true story; every grain in an old panel. He would be chief surgeon in his hospital for old and decrepit masterpieces; he would "cradle" with his own hands—clear the opacity from time-dimmed beauty with savant touch, knit up tenderly the wounds of ages——

"Dankmere," he said, throwing away his cigarette, "I'm going into this business from this minute; and I would like to die in harness, at the end, the companion, surgeon, and friend of old-time pictures. Do you think I can make a living at it?"

"God knows. Do you mean that you're really keen on it?"

"Dead keen."

Dankmere puffed on his cigar: "A chap usually makes out pretty well when he's a bit keen on anything of sorts. You'll be owning the gallery, next, you infernal Yankee!"

Quarren laughed: "I won't forget that you gave me my first real chance in the world. You've done it, too; do you realise it, Dankmere?"

"Very glad I'm sure."

"So am I!" said Quarren with sudden emphasis. "I believe I'm on the right track now. I believe it's in me—in my heart—to work—to *work!*"—he laughed—"as the old chronicles say, 'To the glory of God and the happiness of self and mankind.' . . . I'm grateful to you; do you understand?"

"Awf'lly glad, old chap."

"You funny Englishman—I believe you are. . . . And we'll make this thing go. Down comes my real-estate shingle; I'm a part of the Dankmere Galleries now. I'll rent the basement after our first sale and there you

and I will fuss and tinker and doctor and nurse any poor old derelict of a picture back to its pristine beauty. What?"

"Not I," said the little Earl. "All I'm good for is to furnish the initial stock. You may do what you please with it, and we'll share profits according to contract. Further than that, Quarren, you'll have to count me out."

"Don't you care for pictures?"

"I prefer horses," said the Earl drily—"and, after the stable and kennel, my taste inclines toward Vaudeville." And he cocked up one little leg over the other and whistled industriously at a waltz which he was attempting to compose. He possessed a high, maddening, soprano whistle which Quarren found painful to endure; and he was glad when his lordship departed, jauntily twirling his walking-stick and taking fancy dance steps as far as the front door.

Left alone Quarren leaned back in his chair resting his head against the new olive-tinted velvet.

He had nothing to do but sit there and gaze at the pictures and wait for an answer to his telegram.

It came about dusk and he lighted the gas to read it:

"Come up to Witch-Hollow to-morrow.

"MARIE WYCHERLY."

He could not leave until he had planned for work to go on during his absence. First he arranged with Valasco to identify as nearly as possible, and to appraise, the French and Italian pictures. Then he made an arrangement with Van Boschoven for the Dutch and Flemish; secured Drayton-Quinn for the English; and warned Dankmere not to bother or interfere with these tempera-

mental and irascible gentlemen while in exercise of their professional duties.

"Don't whistle, don't do abrupt skirt-dances, don't sing comic songs, don't obscure the air with cigar smoke, don't go to sleep on the sofa and snore, don't drink fizzes and rattle the ice in your glass——"

"My God!" faltered his lordship, "do you mind if I breathe now and then?"

"I'll be away a few days—Valasco is slow, and the others take their time. Let anybody come in who wants to, but don't sell anything until the experts report to me in writing——"

"Suppose some chap rushes in with ten thousand——"

"No!"

"What?"

"Certainly not. Chaps who rush in with any serious money at all will rush in again all the faster if you make them wait. Don't sell a picture—not even to Valasco or any of the experts——"

"Suppose a charming lady——"

"Now you understand, don't you? I wouldn't think of selling a single canvas until I have their reports and have made up my own mind that they're as nearly right as any expert can be who didn't actually see the artist paint the picture. The only trustworthy expert is the man who saw the picture painted—if you can believe his word."

"But my dear Quarren," protested Dankmere, seriously bewildered—"how could any living expert ever have seen an artist, who died two hundred years ago, paint anything?"

"Right," said Quarren solemnly; "the point is

keenly taken. Ergo, there *are* no real experts, only guessers. When Valasco *et al* finish their guessing, I'll guess how near they have guessed correctly. Good-bye. . . . You *will* be good, won't you, Dankmere? "

"No fear. I'll keep my weather eye on the shop. Do you want me to sleep here? "

"You'd better, I think. But don't have rowdy parties here, will you? And don't wander away and leave the door open. By George! I believe I'd better stay——"

"Rot! Go on and take your vacation, old chap! Back in a week? "

"Yes; or any time you wire me——"

"Not I. I'll have a jolly time by myself."

"Don't have too many men here in the evening. The smoke will get into those new curtains——"

Dankmere, in his trousers and undershirt, stretched on the divan, laughed and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. Then, reaching forth he took a palm-leaf fan in one hand, a tall, frosty glass in the other, and applied both in a manner from which he could extract the most benefit.

"Bon voyage!" he nodded to Quarren. "My duties and compliments and all that—and pick me out an heiress of sorts—there's a good fellow——"

As Quarren went out he heard his lordship burst forth into his distressing whistle; and he left him searching piercingly for inspiration to complete his "Coster's Hornpipe."

On the train Quarren bought the evening papers; and the first item that met his eye was a front-page column devoted to the Dankmere Galleries. Every paper

had broken out into glaring scare-heads announcing the recent despoiling of Dankmere Tarns and the venture into trade of Algernon Cecil Clarence Fayre, tenth Earl of Dankmere. The majority of papers were facetious, one or two scathing, but the more respectable journals managed to repress a part of their characteristic antagonism and report the matter with a minimum of venom and a rather exhaustive historical accompaniment:

"POOR PEERS EAGER TO SELL HEIRLOOMS

"LORD DANKMERE'S CASE SAID TO BE ONE OF DOZENS AMONG THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY

"GAMBLING SPIRIT BLAMED

"OBSERVERS ASCRIBE POVERTY OF OLD BRITISH FAMILIES TO THIS CAUSE—MANY RENT ROLLS DECLARED TO BE MORTGAGED

"The opening of the so-called Dankmere galleries on Lexington Avenue will bring into the lime-light once more a sprightly though somewhat world-battered little Peer recently and disastrously connected with the stage and its feminine adjuncts.

"The Dankmere galleries blossom in a shabby old house flanked on one side by a Chop-Suey restaurant haunted of celestials, and on the other by an undertaker's establishment displaying the following enterprising sign: Mortem's Popular $50 Funerals! Bury Your Family at Attractive Prices!

"GAMBLING DID IT!

"Gambling usually lands the British Peer on his

aristocratic uppers. But in this case gambolling behind the footlights is responsible for the present display of the Dankmere family pictures in the converted real-estate offices of young Mr. Quarren of cotillion fame.

"Among supposedly well-to-do English nobles the need for ready cash so frequently reaches the acute stage that all manner of schemes are readily resorted to in an effort to 'raise the wind.'

"Lord Dankmere openly admits that had he supposed any valuable 'junk' lay concealed in the attics of his mansion, he would, without hesitation, have converted it into ready money long before this.

"Lord Dankmere's case is only one typical of dozens of others among the exclusive and highly placed of Mayfair. It is a known fact that since the sale of the Capri Madonna (Titian) for $350,000 to the British Government, by special act of Parliament, Daffydill Palace has gradually been unloaded of all treasures not tied by the entail to the estate. For the same sum ($350,000) the late Earl of Blitherington disposed of his famous Library and the sale of the library was known to be necessary for the provision of living funds for the incoming heir. Just recently the Duke of Putney, reputed to be a man of vast wealth, had a difficulty with a dealer concerning the sale of some of his treasures.

"Such cases may be justified by circumstances. The general public hears, however, of only a few isolated cases. The number of private deals that are executed, week in, week out, between impoverished members of the highest nobility—some of them bound, like Lord Blith-

erington and the Duke of Putney by close official ties to the Court—and the agents of either new-rich Britishers or wealthy Americans has reached its maximum, and by degrees unentailed treasures and heirlooms are passing from owners of many centuries to families that were unheard of a dozen years ago.

"THE AWFUL YANKEE

"The American is given priority in the matter of purchase, not only because he pays more, as a rule, but also for the reason that the transfer of his prize to the United States removes the possibility of noble sellers being pestered with awkward questions by the inquisitive. For, however unostentatiously home deals are made and transfers effected, society soon learns the facts. So hard up, however, has the better-known aristocracy become, and so willing are they to trade at fancy sums to anxious purchasers, that several curio dealers in the St. James's quarter hold unlimited power of attorney to act for plutocratic American principals either in the United States or in this country.

"Those who are reasonably entitled to explain the cause of this poverty among old families, whose landed estates are unimpaired in acreage at least, and whose inheritance was of respectable proportions, declare that not since the eighteenth century has the gambling spirit so persistently invaded the inside coteries of high society. The desire to acquire riches quickly seems to have taken hold of the erstwhile staid and conventional upper ten, just as it has seized upon the smart set. The recent booms in oil and rubber have had the effect of transferring many a comfortable rent roll from its own-

er's bankers—milady's just as often as milord's—to the chartered mortgagors of the financial world. The panic in America in 1907 showed to what extent the English nobility was interested, not only in gilt-edged securities, but also to what degree it was involved in wildcat finance. The directing geniuses of many of the suspect ventures of to-day in London are often the possessors of names that are writ rubric in the pages of Debrett and Burke.

"According to a London radical paper, there are at present over a score of estates in the auction mart which must soon pass from some of the bluest-blooded nobles in Great Britain to men whose fortunes have grown in the past few years from the humblest beginnings, a fact which itself cannot fail to change both the tone and constitution of town and country society."

Quarren read every column, grimly, to the end, wincing when he encountered some casual reference to himself and his recent social activities. Then, lips compressed, boyish gaze fixed on the passing landscape, he sat brooding until at last the conductor opened the door and shouted the name of his station.

The Wycherlys' new place, Witch-Hollow, a big rambling farm among the Connecticut hills, was only three hours from New York, and half an hour by automobile from the railroad. The buildings were wooden and not new; a fashionable architect had made the large house "colonially" endurable with furnaces and electricity as well as with fan-lights and fluted pilasters.

Most of the land remained wild—weed-grown pastures, hard-wood ridges, neglected orchards planted seventy years ago. Molly Wycherly had ordered a brand

new old-time garden to be made for her overlooking the wide, unruffled river; also a series of sylvan paths along the wooded shores of the hill-set lake which was inhabited by bass placed there by orders of her husband.

"For Heaven's sake," he said to his wife, "don't try to knock any antiquity into the place; I'm sick of fine old ancestral halls put up by building-loan associations. Plenty of paint and varnish for mine, Molly, and a few durable iron fountains and bronze stags on the lawn——"

"No, Jim," she said firmly.

So he ordered an aeroplane, a herd of sheep, a shepherd, and two tailless sheep-dogs, and made plans to spend most of his vacation yachting, when he did not spend it in town.

But he was restlessly domiciled at Witch-Hollow, now, and he met Quarren at the station in a bright purple runabout which he drove like lightning, one hand on the steering wheel, the other carelessly waving toward the streaky landscape in affable explanation of the various points of interest.

"Quite a little colony of us up here, Quarren," he said. "I don't know why anybody picked out this silly country for estates, but Langly Sprowl started a stud farm over yonder, and then poor Chester Ledwith built a house for his wife in the middle of a thousand acres, over there where you see those maple woods!—and then people began to come and pick up worn-out farms and make 'em into fine old family places—Lester Caldera's model dairies are behind that hill; and that leather-headed O'Hara has a bungalow somewhere—and there's a sort of Hunt Club, too, and a bum pack of Ki-yi's——"

The wind tore most of his speech from his lips and whirled it out of earshot: Quarren caught a word now and then which interested him. It also interested him to observe how Wycherly shaved annihilation at every turn of the road.

"I've asked some men to bring up their biplanes and have a few flies on me," continued his host—"I've a 'Stinger' monoplane and a Kent biplane myself. I can't get any more sensation out of motoring. I'd as soon wheel twins in a go-cart."

Quarren saw him cleverly avoid death with one hand, and laughed.

"Who is stopping with you up here?" he shouted close to Wycherly's ear.

"Nobody—Mrs. Leeds, Chrysos Lacy, and Sir Charles. There are some few neighbours, too—Langly is mousing and prowling about; and that poor Ledwith man is all alone in his big house—fixing to get out of it so his wife can move in from Reno when she's ready for more mischief. . . . Here we are, Quarren! Your stuff will be in your rooms in a few minutes. There's my wife, now——"

He waved his hand to Molly but let Quarren go forward alone while he started across the fields toward his hangar where, in grotesque and vicious-looking immobility, reposed his new winged pet, the little Stinger monoplane, wings set as wickedly as an alert wasp's.

CHAPTER IX

As Quarren came forward between the peonies drooping over the flagged walk, Molly Wycherly, awaiting him on the veranda, laid her forefinger across her lips conjuring caution.

"I didn't tell Strelsa that you were coming," she whispered; "I didn't suppose the child could possibly object."

Quarren's features stiffened:

"Does she?"

"Why—this morning I said carelessly to Jim that I meant to ask you, and Strelsa came into my room later and begged me not to ask you until she had left."

"Why?" inquired the boy, grimly.

"I really don't know, Ricky——"

"Yes, you do. What has happened?"

"You're certainly rude enough——"

"What has happened, Molly?"

"I don't know for certain, I tell you. . . . Langly Sprowl has been roving around the place a great deal lately. He and Strelsa ride together nearly every day."

"Do you think she has come to an understanding with him?"

"She hasn't told me so. Perhaps she prefers Sir Charles."

"Do you believe that?"

"Frankly, no. I'm much more afraid that Langly

"'I didn't tell Strelsa that you were coming,' she whispered."

has persuaded her into some sort of a tacit engagement. . . . I don't know what the child can be thinking of—unless the universal criticism of Langly Sprowl has convinced her of his martyrdom. . . . There'll be a pretty situation when Mary Ledwith returns. . . . I could kill Langly—" She doubled both pretty hands and frowned at Quarren, then her swift smile broke out and she placed the tips of her fingers on his shoulders and stooping from the top step deliberately kissed him.

"You dear fellow," she said; "I don't care what Strelsa thinks; I'm glad you've come. And, oh, Ricky! The papers are full of you and Dankmere and your new enterprise!—I laughed and laughed!—forgive me, but the papers were so funny—and I couldn't help laughing——"

Quarren forced a smile.

"I have an idea," he said, "that our new business is destined to command a good deal of respect sooner or later."

"Has Dankmere anything really valuable in his collection?"

"I'm taking that risk," he said, gaily. "Wait a few weeks, Molly, before you and Jim try to buy the entire collection."

"I can see Jim decorating the new 'Stinger' with old masters," laughed Molly. "Come upstairs with me; I'll show you your quarters. Go lightly and don't talk; Strelsa is wandering around the house somewhere with a bad case of blue devils, and I'd rather she were over her headache before your appearance adds another distressing jolt."

"Has she had another shock recently?"

"A letter from her lawyers. There won't be anything at all left for her."

"Are you sure?"

"She is. Why, Ricky, the City had half a million on deposit there, and even that foxy young man Langly was caught for twice as much more. It's a ghastly scandal—the entire affair. How many cents on a dollar do you suppose poor little Strelsa is going to recover? Not two!"

They paused at the door of his quarters. His luggage had already arrived and a valet was busy unpacking for him.

"Sir Charles, Chrysos Lacy, Jim and I are motoring. We'll be back for tea. Prowl about, Ricky; the place is yours and everything in it—except that little girl over there"—pointing along the corridor to a distant door.

He smiled. "She may be, yet," he said lightly. "Don't come back too soon."

So Molly went away laughing; and presently through the lace curtains, Quarren saw Jim Wycherly whirl up in a yellow touring car, and Molly, Chrysos, and Sir Charles clamber in for one of those terrific and headlong drives which made Jim's hospitality a terror to the majority of his guests.

Quarren watched the car disappear, hopelessly followed by an overfed setter. Then the dust settled; the fat family pet came panting back to lie down on the lawn, dead beat, and Quarren resumed his toilet.

Half an hour later he emerged from his quarters wearing tennis flannels and screwing the stem into a new pipe which he had decided to break in—a tall, well-built, pleasant-eyed young fellow with the city pallor

blanching his skin and the breeze stirring his short blond hair.

"Hello, old man!" he said affably to the fat setter, who thumped his tail on the grass and looked up at Quarren with mild, deerlike eyes.

"We're out of the running, we two—aren't we?" he added. "You try very pluckily to keep up with your master's devil-wagon; I run a more hopeless race. . . . For the golden chariot is too swift for me, and the race is to the swift; and the prize, doggy, is a young girl's unhappy heart which is slowly turning from sensitive flesh and blood into pure and senseless gold."

He stood under a tree slowly filling his pipe. The scent of early summer was in the air; the odour of June peonies, and young leaves and clear waters; of grasses and hedges and distant hemlocks.

Leisurely, the fat dog waddling at his heels, he sauntered about the Wycherly place inspecting its renovated attractions—among others the new old-fashioned garden full of new old-fashioned flowers so marvellously developed by modern skill that he recognised scarcely any of them. Petunias, with their great fluted and scalloped blossoms resembled nothing he had known by that name; the peonies seemed to him enormous and exotic; rockets, larkspurs, spiderwort, pinks, all had been so fantastically and grotesquely developed by modern horticulture that Quarren felt as though he were wandering alone among a gardenful of strangers. Only here and there a glimpse of familiar sweet-william or the faint perfume of lemon-verbena brought a friendly warmth into his heart; but, in hostile silence he passed by hydrangea and althea, syringa and preposterous canna, quietly detesting the rose garden where scores of frail and frivo-

lous strangers nodded amid anæmic leaves, or where great, blatant, aniline-coloured blossoms bulged in the sun, seeming to repeat with every strapping bud their Metropolitan price per dozen.

He looked in at the stables and caressed a horse or two; examined the sheepfold; passed by garage and hangar without interest, lingered wistfully by the kennels where a dozen nervous little Blue Beltons, too closely inbred, welcomed his appearance with hysteric emotions.

Beyond the kennels he caught a distant glimpse of blue water glimmering between tall hemlock trees; so he took the lake path and presently rounded a sharp curve where a rustic bench stood, perched high above the rocky shore. Strelsa Leeds, seated there, looked up from the newspaper which she had been reading. Some of the colour faded from her cheeks. There was a second's silence, then, as though a little bewildered, she looked inquiringly into his smiling eyes and extended her hand toward the hand he offered.

"I didn't know you were coming," she said with pallid self-possession.

"I telegraphed for permission. Is your headache better?"

"Yes. Have you just arrived?"

"A little while ago. I was told to wander about and enjoy the Wycherlys' new ancestral palace. Does a ghost go with the place? You're rather pale, Mrs. Leeds. Have they engaged you as the family phantom?"

She laughed a little, then her gray eyes grew sombre; and, watching, he saw the dusky purple hue deepen in them under the downward sweep of the lashes.

"So he took the lake path and

presently rounded a sharp curve."

He waited for her to speak, and she did not. Her remote gaze rested on the lake where the base of the rocks fell away sheer into limpid depths; where green trees, reversed in untroubled reflection, tinted the still waters exquisitely, and bits of sky lay level as in a looking-glass.

No fish broke the absolute stillness of the surface, no breeze ruffled it; only the glitter of some drifting dragon-fly accented the intense calm.

"Are you—offended?" she said at last, her gaze now riveted on the water.

"Of course not!" he replied cordially.

She lifted her eyes, surveying him in silence.

"Why did you suppose so?" he asked amiably.

"Did you receive my letter?"

"Of course I did."

"You did not answer it."

"I didn't know how—then."

His reply seemed to perplex her—so did his light and effortless good-humour.

"I know how to answer it now," he added.

She forced a smile:

"Isn't it too late to think of answering that letter, Mr. Quarren?"

"Oh, no," he said pleasantly; "a man who is afraid of being too late seldom dares start. . . . I wonder if anything could induce you to ask me to be seated?"

She flushed vividly and moved to the extreme edge of the seat. He took the other end, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and put it in his pocket.

"Now," he said, smiling, "I am ready to answer your letter."

"Really, Mr. Quarren——"

"Don't you want me to?"

"I—don't think—it matters, now——"

"But it's only civil of me to answer it," he insisted, laughing.

She could not entirely interpret his mood. Of one thing she had been instantly conscious—he had changed since she had seen him—changed radically. There was about him, now, a certain inexplicable air suggesting assurance—an individuality which had not heretofore clearly distinguished him—a hidden hint of strength. Or was she mistaken—abashed—remembering what she had written him in a bitter hour of fear and self-abasement? A thousand times she had regretted writing to him what she had written.

She said, coldly: "I think that my letter may very properly remain unanswered."

"You think I'm too late?"

She looked at him steadily:

"Yes, you are too late—in every sense."

"You are mistaken," he said, cheerfully.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that all these superficial details which, under the magnifying glass of fear, you and I have regarded with terrified respect, amount to nothing. Real trouble is something else; the wings of tragedy have never yet even brushed either you or me. But unless you let me answer that letter of yours, and listen very carefully to my answer, you and I are going to learn some day what tragedy really is."

"Mr. Quarren!" she exclaimed, forcing a laugh, "are you trying to make me take you seriously?"

"I certainly am."

"That in itself is tragic enough," she laughed.

"It really is," he said: "because it has come to a time when you have *got* to take me seriously."

She had settled herself into a bantering attitude toward him and now gaily maintained the lighter vein:

"Merely because you and Lord Dankmere have become respectable tradesmen and worthy citizens you've hastened up here to admonish the frivolous, I suppose."

"I'm so respectable and worthy," he admitted, "that I couldn't resist rushing up here to exhibit myself. Look at that bruise!"—he held out to her his left hand badly discoloured between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh," she exclaimed, half serious, "what *is* it?"

"A bang with an honest hammer. Dankmere and I were driving picture-nails. Oh, Strelsa! you should have listened to my inadvertent blank verse, celebrating the occasion!"

The quick, warm colour stained her cheeks as she heard him use her given name for the first time. She raised her eyes to his in questioning silence, but he was still laughing over his reminiscence and seemed so frankly unconscious of the liberty he had taken that, again, a slight sense of confusion came over her, and she leaned back, uncertain, inwardly wondering what his attitude toward her might really mean.

"Do you admit my worthiness as a son of toil?" he insisted.

"How can I deny it?—with that horrid corroboration on your hand. I'll lend you some witch-hazel——"

"Witch-hazel from Witch-Hollow ought to accomplish all kinds of magic," he said. "I'll be delighted to have you bind it up."

"I didn't offer to; I offered you merely the ingredients."

"But you are the principal ingredient. Otherwise there's no virtue in a handkerchief soaked with witch-hazel."

She smiled, then in a low voice: "There's no virtue in me, either."

"Is that why you didn't include yourself in your first-aid offer?"

"Perhaps," she said, quietly, watching him out of her violet-gray eyes—a little curiously and shyly now, because he had moved nearer to her, and her arm, extended along the back of the seat, almost touched his shoulder.

She was considering whether or not to withdraw it when he said:

"Have you any idea what a jolly world this old planet can be when it wants to?"

She laughed.

He went on: "I mean when *you* want it to be. Because it's really up to you."

"To *me*, my slangy friend?"

"To you, to me, to anybody, Strelsa."

This time he was looking smilingly and deliberately into her eyes; and she could not ignore his unwarranted freedom.

"Why do you use my first name, Mr. Quarren?" she asked quietly.

"Because I always think of you as Strelsa, not as Mrs. Leeds."

"Is that a reason?"—very gravely.

"You can make it so if you will."

She hesitated, watching his expression. Then:

"You say that you always think of me—that way. But I'm afraid that, even in your thoughts, the repetition of my name has scarcely accustomed you to the use of it."

"You mean that I don't think of you very frequently?"

"Something like that. But please, Mr. Quarren, if you really mean to give me a little of that friendship which I had begun to despair of, don't let our very first reunion degenerate into silly conversation——"

"Strelsa——"

"No!—please."

"When?"

She flushed, then, slightly impatient: "Do you make it a point, Mr. Quarren?"

"Not unless you do."

"I? What do you mean?"

"Will you answer me honestly?"

"Have you ever found me dishonest?"

"Sometimes—with yourself."

Suddenly the colour surged in her cheeks and she turned her head abruptly. After a few moments' silence:

"Ask your question," she said in a calm and indifferent voice.

"Then—do you ever, by any accident, think of me?"

She foresaw at once what was coming, bit her lip, but saw no way to avoid it.

"I think of my friends—and you among them."

"Do you always think of me as 'Mr. Quarren'?"

"I—your friends—people are eternally dinning your name into my ears——"

"Please answer."

"What?" She turned toward him disdainfully: "Would it gratify you to know that I think of you as Rix, Ricky, Dick—whatever they call you?"

"Which?" he insisted, laughing. And finally she laughed, too, partly in sheer exasperation.

"Rix!" she said: "Now are you satisfied? I don't know why on earth I made such a scene about it. It's the way I think of you—when I happen to remember you. But if you fancy for a moment I am going to call you that, please awake from vain dreams, my airy friend——"

"Won't you?"

"No."

"Some day?"

"Certainly not. Why should I? I don't want to. I don't feel like it. It would be forced, artificial—an effort—and I don't desire—wish—care——"

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, laughing, "that's enough, you poor child! Do you think I'd permit you to undergo the suffering necessary to the pronunciation of my name?"

Amused yet resentful, perplexed, uncertain of this new phase of the man beside her, she leaned back, head slightly lowered; but her gray eyes were swiftly lifted every few moments to watch him. Suddenly she became acutely conscious of her extended arm where her hand now was lightly in touch with the rough cloth of his sleeve; and she checked a violent impulse to withdraw her hand. Then, once more, and after all these months, the same strange sensation passed through her—a thrilling consciousness of his nearness.

Absolutely motionless, confused yet every instinct

alert to his slightest word or movement, she sat there, gray eyes partly lowered.

He neither spoke nor moved; his pleasant glance rested absently on her, then wandered toward the quiet lake; and venturing to raise her eyes she saw him smile to himself and wondered uneasily what his moment's thought might be.

He said, still smiling: "What is it in that curious combination of individualities known as Strelsa Leeds, that rejects one composite specimen known to you as *Mister* Quarren?"

She smiled, uncertainly:

"But I *don't* reject you, *Mister* Quarren."

"Oh, yes, you do. I'm sensible of an occult wall between us."

"How absurd. Of course there is a wall."

"I've got to climb over it then——"

"I don't wish you to!"

"Strelsa?"

"W-what?"

"That wall isn't a golden one, is it?"

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"I mean money," he said; and she blushed from neck to hair.

"Please don't say such things——"

"No, I won't. Because if you cared enough for me you wouldn't let that kind of a wall remain between us——"

"I ask you not to talk about such——"

"You *wouldn't*," he insisted, smiling. "Nor is there now any reason why such a man as I am becoming, and ultimately will be, should not tell you that he cares——"

"Please—if you please—I had rather not——"

"So," he concluded, still smiling, "the matter, as it stands, is rather plain. You don't care for me enough. I love you—I don't know how much, yet. When a girl interposes such an occult barrier and a man comes slap up against it, he's too much addled to understand exactly how seriously he is in love with the unknown on the other side."

He spoke in a friendly, almost impersonal way and, as though quite thoughtlessly, dropped his left hand over her right which lay extended along the back of the seat. And the contact seemed to paralyse every nerve in her body.

"Because," he continued, leisurely, "the unknown does lie on the other side of that barrier—your unknown self, Strelsa—undiscovered as yet by me——"

Her lips moved mechanically:

"I wrote you—*told* you what I am."

"Oh, that?" He laughed: "That was a mood. I don't think you know yourself——"

"I do. I *am* what I wrote you."

"Partly perhaps—partly a rather frightened girl, still quivering from a sequence of blows——"

"Remembering all the other blows that have marked almost every year of my life!—But those would not count—if I were not selfish, dishonest, and a coward."

His hand closed slightly over hers; for a moment or two the pressure left her restless, ill at ease; but she made no movement. And gradually the contact stirred something within her to vague response. A strange sense of rest subtly invaded her; and she remained silent and motionless, looking down at the still lake below.

"What *is* the barrier?" he asked quietly.

"There is no barrier to your friendship—if you care to offer it, now that you know me."

"But I *don't* know you. And I care for more than your friendship even after the glimpse I have had of you."

"I—care only for friendship, Mr. Quarren."

"Could you ever care for more?"

"No. . . . I don't wish to. . . . There *is* nothing higher."

"*Could* you—if there were?"

But she remained silent, disturbed, troubled once more by the light weight of his hand over hers which seemed to be awaking again the new senses that his touch had discovered so long ago—and which had slumbered in her ever since. Was this acquiescence, this listless relaxation, this lassitude which was becoming almost painful—or sweet—she did not understand which—was this also a part of friendship? Was it a part of anything intellectual, spiritual, worthy?—this deepening emotion which, no longer vague and undefined, was threatening her pulses, her even breathing—menacing the delicate nerves in her hand so that already they had begun to warn her, quivering——

She withdrew her hand, sharply, and straightened her shoulders with a little quick indrawn breath.

"I've got to tell you something," she said abruptly—scarcely knowing what she was saying.

"What, Strelsa?"

"I'm going to marry Langly Sprowl. I've said I would."

Perhaps he had expected it. For a few moments the smile on his face became fixed and white, then he said, cheerfully:

"I'm going to fight for you all the same."

"What!" she exclaimed, crisply.

"Fight hard, too," he added. "I'm on my mettle at last."

"You have no chance, Mr. Quarren."

"With—*him?*" He shrugged his contempt. "I don't consider him at all——"

"I don't care to hear you speak that way!" she said, hotly.

"Oh, I won't. A man's an ass to vilify his rival. But I wasn't even thinking of him, Strelsa. My fight is with you—with your unknown self behind that barrier. *Garde à vous!*"

"I decline the combat, Monsieur," she said, trying to speak lightly.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of *you*—the *visible* you that I'm looking at and which I know something about. That incarnation of Strelsa Leeds will fight me openly, fairly—and I have an even chance to win——"

"Do you think so?" she said, lip between her teeth.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"I do. . . . But it's your unknown self I'm afraid of, Strelsa. God alone knows what it may do to both of us."

"There is no other self! What do you mean?"

"There are *two* others—not this intellectual, friendly, kindly, visible self that offers friendship and accepts it—not even the occult, aloof, spiritual self that I sometimes see brooding in your gray eyes——"

"There *is* no other!" she said, flushing and rising to her feet.

"Is it dead?"

"It never lived!"

"Then," he said coolly, "it will be born as sure as I stand here!—born to complete the trinity." He glanced out over the lake, then swung around sharply: "You are wrong. It *has* been born. And that unknown self is hostile to me; and I know it!"

They walked toward the house together, silent for a while. Then she said: "I think we have talked some nonsense. Don't you?"

"*You* haven't."

"You're a generous boy; do you know it?"

"You say so."

"Oh, I'll cheerfully admit it. If you weren't you'd detest me—perhaps despise me."

"Men don't detest or despise a hurt and frightened child."

"But a selfish and cowardly woman? What does a man of your sort think of her?"

"I don't know," he said. "Whatever you are I can't help loving you."

She strove to laugh but her mouth suddenly became tremulous. After a while when she could control her lips she said:

"I want to talk some more to you—and I don't know how; I don't even know what I want to say except that—that——"

"What, Strelsa?"

"Please be—kind to me." She smiled at him, but her lips still quivered.

He said after a moment: "I couldn't be anything else."

"Are you very sure?"

"Yes."

"It means a great deal to me," she said.

They reached the house, but the motor party had not yet returned. Tea was served to them on the veranda; the fat setter came and begged for tastes of things that were certain to add to his obesity; and he got them in chunks and bolted them, wagging.

An hour later the telephone rang; it was Molly on the wire and she wanted to speak to Quarren. He could hear her laughing before she spoke:

"Ricky dear?"

"Yes."

"Am I an angel or otherwise?"

"Angel always—but why particularly at this instant?"

"Stupid! Haven't you had her alone all the afternoon?"

"Yes—you corker!"

"Well, then!"

"Molly, I worship you."

"*Et après?*"

"I'll double that! I adore you also!"

"Content! What are you two doing?"

"Strelsa and I have been taking tea."

"Oh, is it 'Strelsa' already?"

"Very unwillingly on her part."

"It isn't 'Ricky,' too, is it?"

"Alas! not yet!"

"No matter. The child is horribly lonely and depressed. *What* do you think I've done, very cleverly?"

"What?"

"Flattered Jim and his driving until I induced him to take us all the way to North Linden. We can't possibly get back until dinner. But that's not all."

"What more, most wonderful of women?"

"I've got *him* with us," she said with satisfaction. "I made Jim stop and pick him up. I *knew* he was planning to drop in on Strelsa. And I made it such a personal matter that he should come with us to see some fool horses at Acremont that he couldn't wriggle out of it particularly as Strelsa is my guest and he's rather wary of offending me. Now, Ricky, make the best of your time because the beast is dining with us. I couldn't avoid asking him."

"Very well," said Quarren grimly.

He went back to the veranda where Strelsa sat behind the tea-table in her frail pink gown looking distractingly pretty and demure.

"What had Molly to say to *you* all that time?" she asked.

"Was I long away?"

"Yes, you were!"

"I'm delighted you found the time too long——"

"I did not say so! If you think it was short I shall warn Jim Wycherly how time flies with you and Molly. . . . Oh, dear! *Is* that a mosquito?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Quarren.

"Then indoors I go!" exclaimed Strelsa indignantly. "You may come with me or remain out here and be slowly assassinated."

And she went in, rather hastily, calling to him to close the screen door.

Quarren glanced around the deserted drawing-room. Through the bay-window late afternoon sunlight poured flooding the room with a ruddy glory.

"I wonder if there's enough of this celestial radiance to make a new aureole for you?" he said.

"So my old one is worn out, is it?"

"I meant to offer you a *double* halo."

"You do say sweet things—for a rather obstinate young man," she said, flashing a laughing side glance at him. Then she walked slowly through the sunshine into the dimmer music-room, and found a seat at the piano. Her mood changed; she became gay, capricious, even a trifle imperative:

"Please lean on the piano." He did so, inquiringly.

"Otherwise," she said, "you'd have attempted to seat yourself on this bench; and there isn't room for both of us without crowding."

"If you moved a little——"

"But I won't," she said serenely, and dropped her slim hands on the key-board.

She sang one or two modern songs, and he took second part in a pleasant, careless, but acceptable barytone.

"The old ones are the best," she commented, running lightly through a medley ranging from "The Mikado" to "Erminie," the "Black Hussar," and "The Mascotte." They sang the "gobble duet" from the latter fairly well:

She.

"When on your manly form I gaze
A sense of pleasure passes o'er me";

He.

"The murmured music of your voice
Is sweeter far than liquid honey!"

And so on through the bleating of his sheep and the gobbling of her turkeys until they could scarcely sing for laughing.

"'The old ones are the

best.' she commented."

Then the mood of the absurd seized her; and she made him sing "Johnny Schmoker" with her until they could scarcely draw breath for the eternal refrain:

"Kanst du spielen?"

and the interminable list of musical instruments so easily mastered by that Teutonic musician.

"I want to sing you a section of one of those imbecile, colourless, pastel-tinted and very precious Debussy things," she exclaimed; and did so, wandering and meandering on and on through meaningless mazes of sound until he begged for mercy and even had to stay her hands on the key-board with his own.

She stopped then, pretending disappointment and surprise.

"Very well," she said; "you'll have to match my performance with something equally imbecile"; and she composed herself to listen.

"What shall I do that is sufficiently imbecile?" he asked gravely; "turn seven solemn handsprings?"

"That isn't silly enough. Roll over on the rug and play dead."

He prepared to do so but she wouldn't permit him:

"No! I don't want to remember you doing such a thing. . . . All the same I believe *you* could do it and not lose—lose——"

"Dignity?"

"No—I don't know what I mean. Come, Mr. Quarren; I am waiting for you to do something silly."

"Shall I say it or do it?"

"Either."

"Then I'll recite something very, very precious—subtly, intricately, and psychologically precious."

"Oh, please do!"

"It's—it's about a lover."

She blushed.

"Do you mind?"

"You *are* the limit! Of course I don't!"

"It's about a lady, too."

"Naturally."

"And love—rash, precipitate, unwarranted, unrequited, and fatal love."

"I can stand it if you can," she said with the faintest glimmer of malice in her smile.

"All right. The title is: '*Oh, Love! Oh, Why?*'"

"A perfectly good title," she said gravely. "I alway says 'why?' to Love."

So he bowed to her and began very seriously:

"Oh, Lover in haste, beware of Fate!
Wait for a moment while I relate
A harrowing tragedy up to date
Of innate Hate.

"A maiden rocked on her rocking-chair;
Her store-curls stirred in the summer air;
An amorous Fly espied her there,
So rare and fair.

"Before she knew where she was at,
He'd kissed the maiden where she sat,
And she batted him one which slapped him flat
Ker-spat! Like that!

"Oh, Life! Oh, Death! Oh, swat-in-the-eye!
Beyond the Bournes of the By-and-By,
Spattered the soul of that amorous Fly.
Oh, Love! Oh, Why?"

She pretended to be overcome by the tragic pathos of the poem:

"I cannot bear it," she protested; "I can't endure the realism of that spattered soul. Why not let her wave him away and have him plunge headlong onto a sheet of fly-paper and die a buzzing martyr?"

Then, swift as a weather-vane swinging from north to south her mood changed once more and softened; and her fingers again began idling among the keys, striking vague harmonies.

He came across the room and stood looking down over her shoulder; and after a moment her hands ceased stirring, fell inert on the keys.

A single red shaft of light slanted on the wall. It faded out to pink, lingered; and then the gray evening shadows covered it. The world outside was very still; the room was stiller, save for her heart, which only she could hear, rapid, persistent, beating the reveille.

She heard it and sat motionless; every nerve in her was sounding the alarm; every breath repeated the prophecy; and she did not stir, even when his arm encircled her. Her head, fallen partly back, rested a moment against his shoulder: she met his light caress with unresponsive lips and eyes that looked up blindly into his.

Then her face burned scarlet and she sprang up, retreating as he caught her slender hand:

"No!—please. Let me go! This is too serious—even if we did not mean it——"

"You know I mean it," he said simply.

"You must not! You understand why! . . . And don't—again! I am not—I do not choose to—to allow—endure—such—things——"

He still held her by one hand and she stood twisting at it and looking at him with cheeks still crimson and eyes still a little dazed.

"Please!" she repeated—and "please!" And she came toward him a step, and laid her other hand over the one that still held hers.

"Won't you be kind to me?" she said under her breath. "Be kind to me—and let me go."

"Am I unkind?"

"Yes—yes! You know—you know how it is with me! Let me go my way. . . . I *am* going anyhow!" she added fiercely; "you can't check me—not for one moment!"

"Check you from what, Strelsa?"

"From—what I want out of life!—tranquillity, ease, security, happiness——"

"Happiness?"

"Yes—yes! It *will* be that! I don't need anything except what I shall have. I don't want anything else. Can't you understand? Do you think women feel as—as men do? Do you think the kind of love that men experience is also experienced by women? I don't want it; I don't require it! I've—I've always had a contempt for it—and I have still. . . . Anyway I have offered you the best that is in me to offer any man—friendship. That is the nearest I can come to love. Why can't you take it—and let me alone! What is it to you if I marry and find security and comfort and quiet and protection, as long as I give you my friendship—as long as I never swerve in it—as long as I hold you first among my friends—first among men if you wish! More I cannot offer you—I will not! Now let me go!"

"Your *other* self, fighting me," he said, half to himself.

"No, *I* am! What do you mean by my other self! There *is* no other——"

"Its lips rested on mine for a moment!"

She blushed scarlet:

"Is *that* what you mean!—the stupid, unworthy, material self——"

"The trinity is incomplete without it."

She wrenched her hand free, and stood staring at him breathing unevenly as though frightened.

After a moment he began to pace the floor, hands dropped into his coat pockets, his teeth worrying his under lip:

"I'm not going to give you up," he said. "I love you. Whatever is lacking in you makes no difference to me. My being poor and your being poor makes no difference either. I simply don't care—I don't even care what you think about it. Because I know that we will be worth it to each other—whether you think so or not. And you evidently don't, but I can't help that. If I'm any good I'll make you think as I do——"

He swung on his heel and came straight up to her, took her in his arms and kissed her, then, releasing her, turned toward the window, his brows slightly knitted.

Through the panes poured the sunset flood, bathing him from head to foot in ruddy light. He stared into the red West and the muscles tightened under his cheeks.

"*Can't* you care?" he said, half to himself.

She stood dumb, still cold and rigid with repulsion from the swift and almost brutal contact. That time nothing in her had responded. Vaguely she felt that

what had been there was now dead—that she never could respond again; that, from the lesser emotions, she was clean and free forever.

"*Can't* you care for a man who loves you, Strelsa?" he said again, turning toward her.

"Is *that* your idea of love?"

He shook his head, hopelessly:

"Oh, it's everything else, too—everything on earth—and afterward—everything—mind, soul and body—birth, life, death—sky and land and sea—everything that is or was or will be——"

His hands clenched, relaxed; he made a gesture, half checked—looked up at her, looked long and steadily into her expressionless eyes.

"You care for money, position, ease, security, tranquillity—more than for love; do you?"

"Yes."

"Is that true?"

"Yes. Because, unless you mean friendship, I care nothing for love."

"That is your answer."

"It is."

"Then there *is* something lacking in you."

"Perhaps. I have never loved in the manner you mean. I do not wish to. Perhaps I am incapable of it. . . . I hope I am; I believe—I believe—" But she fell silent, standing with eyes lowered and the warm blood once more stinging her cheeks.

Presently she looked up, calm, level-eyed:

"I think you had better ask my forgiveness before you go."

He shrugged:

"Yes, I'll ask it if you like."

To keep her composure became difficult:

"It is your affair, Mr. Quarren—if you still care to preserve our friendship."

"Would a kiss shatter it?"

She smiled:

"A look, a word, the quiver of an eyelash is enough."

"It doesn't seem to be very solidly founded, does it?"

"Friendship is the frailest thing in the world—and the mightiest. . . . I am waiting for your decision."

He walked up to her again, and she steeled herself, not knowing what to expect.

"Will you marry me, Strelsa?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I have told Mr. Sprowl that I will marry him."

"Also because you don't love me; is that so?"

She said tranquilly: "I can't afford to marry you. I wouldn't love you anyway."

"Couldn't?"

"Wouldn't," she said calmly; but her face was crimson.

"Oh," he said under his breath—"you *are* capable of love."

"I think not, Mr. Quarren; but I am very capable of hate."

And, looking up, he saw it for an instant, clear in her eyes. Then it died out; she turned a trifle pale, walked to the window and stood leaning against it, one hand on the curtain.

She did not seem to hear him when he came up behind her, and he touched her lightly on the arm:

"I ask your forgiveness," he said.

"It is granted, Mr. Quarren."

"Have I ruined our friendship?"

"I don't know what you have done," she said wearily.

A few moments later the motor arrived; Quarren turned on the electric lights in the room; Strelsa walked across to the piano and seated herself.

She was playing rag-time when the motor party entered; Quarren came forward and shook hands with Chrysos Lacy and Sir Charles; Langly Sprowl passed him with a short nod, saying "How are you, Quarren?" —and kept straight on to Strelsa.

"Rotten luck," he said in his full, careless voice; "I'd meant to ride over and chance a gallop with you but Wycherly picked me up and started on one of his break-neck tears. . . . What have you been up to all day?"

"Nothing—Mr. Quarren came."

"I see—showed him about, I expect."

"A—little."

"Are you feeling fit, Strelsa?"

"Perfectly. . . . Why?"

"You look a bit streaky——"

"Thank you!"

"'Pon my word you do—a bit under the weather, you know——"

"Woman's only friend and protector—a headache," she said, gaily rattling off more rag-time. "Where did you go, Langly?"

"To look over some silly horses——"

"They're fine nags!" remonstrated Molly—"and I was perfectly sure that Langly would buy half a dozen."

"Not I," said that hatchet-faced young man; and

into his sleek and restless features came a glimmer of shrewdness—the sly thrift that lurks in the faces of those who bargain much and wisely in petty wares. It must have been a momentary ancestral gleam from his rum-smuggling ancestors, for Langly Sprowl had never dealt in little things.

Chrysos Lacy was saying: "It's adorable to see you again, Ricky. What *is* this we hear about you and Lord Dankmere setting up shop?"

"It's true," he laughed. "Come in and buy an old master, Chrysos, at bargain prices."

"I shall insist on Jim buying several," said Molly.

Her husband laughed derisively:

"When I can buy a perfectly good Wright biplane for the same money? Come to earth, Molly!"

"You'll come to earth if you go sky-skating around the clouds in that horrid little Stinger, Jim," she said. "Why couldn't *you* take out the Stinger for a little exercise?"—turning to Sprowl.

"I'm going to," said Sprowl in his full penetrating voice, not conscious that it required courage to risk a flight with the Stinger. Nobody had ever imputed any lack of that sort of courage to Langly Sprowl. He simply did not understand bodily fear.

Strelsa glanced up at him from the piano:

"It's rather risky, isn't it?"

He merely stared at her out of his slightly protruding eyes as though she were speaking an unfamiliar language.

"Jim," said Quarren, "would you mind taking me as a passenger?"

Wycherly, reckless enough anyway, balked a little at the proposition:

"That Stinger is too light and too tricky I'm afraid."

"Isn't she built for two?"

"Well, I suppose she *could* get off the ground with you and me——"

"All right; let's try her?"

"Jim! I won't let you," said his wife.

"Don't be silly, Molly. Rix and I are not going up if she won't take us——"

"I forbid you to try! It's senseless!"

Her husband laughed and finished his whisky and soda. Then twirling his motor goggles around his fingers he stood looking at Strelsa.

"You're a pretty little peach," he said sentimentally, "and I'm sorry Molly is here or——"

"Do *you* care?" laughed Strelsa, looking around at him over her shoulder. "*I* don't mind being adored by *you*, Jim."

"Don't you, sweetness?"

"Indeed I don't."

Wycherly started toward her: Langly Sprowl, who neither indulged in badinage nor comprehended it in others, turned a perfectly expressionless face on his host, who said:

"You old muffin head, did you ever smile in your life? You'd better try now because I'm going to take your best girl away from you!"

Which bored Sprowl; and he turned his lean, narrow head away as a sleek and sinister dog turns when laughed at.

Strelsa slipped clear of the piano and vanished, chased heavily by Wycherly.

Molly said: "It's time to dress, good people.

Langly, your man is upstairs with your outfit. Come, Chrysos, dear—Rix, have you everything you want?" she added in a low voice as he stood aside for her to pass: "Have you *everything*, Ricky?"

"Nothing," he said.

"The little minx! *Is* it Langly?"

"Yes."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" And, aloud: "Jim! Do let Langly try out the Stinger to-morrow."

Her husband, who had given up his search for Strelsa, said that Sprowl was welcome.

People scattered to their respective quarters; Quarren walked slowly to his. Sprowl, passing with his mincing, nervous stride, said: "How's little Dankmere?"

"All right," replied Quarren briefly.

"Cheap little beggar," commented Sprowl.

"He happens to be my partner," said the other.

"He suits your business no doubt," said Sprowl with a contempt he took no pains to conceal—a contempt which very plainly included Quarren as well as the Earl and the picture business.

Arrived at his door he glanced around to stare absently at Quarren. The latter said, pleasantly:

"I don't suppose you meant to be offensive, Sprowl; you simply can't help it; can you?"

"What?"

"I mean, you can't help being a bounder. It's just in you, isn't it?"

For a moment Sprowl's hatchet face was ghastly; he opened his mouth to speak, twice, then jerked open his door and disappeared.

CHAPTER X

Quarren had been at Witch-Hollow three days when Dankmere called him on the long-distance telephone.

"Do you want me to come back?" asked the young fellow. "I don't mind if you do; I'm quite ready to return——"

"Not at all, my dear chap," said his lordship. "I fancied you might care to hear how matters are going in the Dankmere Galleries."

"Of course I do, but I rather hoped nothing in particular would happen for a week or so——"

"Plenty has. You know those experts of yours, Valasco, Drayton-Quinn, and that Hollander Van Boschoven. Well, they don't get on. Each has come to me privately, and in turn, and told me that the others were no good——"

"Your rôle is to remain amiable and non-committal," said Quarren. "Let them talk——"

"Valasco and Drayton-Quinn won't speak, and Van Boschoven has notified me that he declines to come to the house as long as either of the others are there."

"Very well; arrange to have them there on different days."

"I don't think Valasco will come back at all."

"Why not?"

"Because—the fact is—I believe I practically—so to speak—hit him."

"What!"

"Fact, old chap."

"Why?"

"Well, he asked me if I knew more about anything than I did about pictures. I didn't catch his drift for about an hour—but then it came to me, and I got up out of my chair and walked over and punched his head. I don't think he'll come back, do you?"

"No, I don't. What else have you been doing?" said Quarren angrily.

"Nothing. One picture—the Raeburn portrait—has a bad hole in it."

"How did it happen?"

"Rather extraordinary thing, that! I was giving a most respectable card party—some ladies and gentlemen of sorts—from the Winter Garden I believe—and one of the ladies inadvertently shyed a glass at another lady——"

"For Heaven's sake, Dankmere——"

"Quite right old chap—my fault entirely—I won't do it again. But, do you know, the gallery already has become a most popular resort. People are coming and going all day—a lot of dealers among them I suspect—and there have been a number of theatrical people who want to hire pictures for certain productions to be staged next winter——"

"We don't do that sort of thing!"

"That's what I thought; but there was one very fetching girl who opens in 'Ancestors' next October——"

"No, no, no!"

"Right-o! I'll tell her at luncheon. . . . I say, Quarren; Karl Westguard wants the gallery to-night. May I let him have it?"

"Certainly. What for?"

"Oh, some idea of his—I've forgotten what he said."

"I believe I'd better come down," said Quarren bluntly.

"Don't dream of it, old fellow. Everything is doing nicely. My respects to the fair. By-the-bye—anything in my line up there?"

Quarren laughed:

"I'm afraid not, Dankmere."

"*Very* well," said the Earl, airily. "I'm not worrying now, you know. *Good*-bye, old sport!"

And he rang off.

Quarren meeting Molly in the hall said:

"I think I'd better leave this afternoon. Dankmere is messing matters."

"Are you going to run away?" she said in a low voice, glancing sideways at Strelsa who had just passed them wearing her riding habit.

"Run away," he repeated, also lowering his voice. "From whom?"

"From Langly Sprowl."

He shrugged and looked out of the window.

"It *is* running away," insisted his pretty hostess. "You have a chance I think."

"Not the slightest."

"You are wrong. Strelsa wept in her sleep all night. How does that strike you?"

"Not over me," he said grimly; but added: "How do you know she did?"

"Her maid told mine," admitted Molly shame-

lessly. "Now if you are going to criticise my channels of information I'll remind you that Richelieu himself——"

"Oh, Molly! Molly! What a funny girl you are!" he said, laughing. "You're a sweet, loyal little thing, too—but there's no use—" His face became expressionless, almost haggard—"there's no use," he repeated under his breath.

Slowly, side by side, they walked out to the veranda, her hand resting lightly just within the crook of his arm, he, absent-mindedly filling his pipe.

"Strelsa likes you," she said.

"With all the ardour and devotion of a fish," he returned, coolly.

"Rix?"

"What?"

"Do you know," said Molly, thoughtfully, "she *is* a sort of a fish. She has the emotions of a mollusc as far as your sex is concerned. Some women *are* that way—more women than men would care to believe. . . . Do you know, Ricky, if you'll let us alone, it is quite natural for us to remain indifferent to considerations of that sort?"

She stood watching the young fellow busy with his pipe.

"It's only when you keep at us long enough that we respond," she said. "Some of us are quickly responsive; it takes many of us a long while to catch fire. Threatened emotion instinctively repels many of us—the more fastidious among us, the finer grained and more delicately nerved, are essentially reserved. Modesty, pride, a natural aloofness, are as much a part of many women as their noses and fingers——"

"What becomes of modesty and pride when a girl marries for money?" he asked coolly.

"Some women can give and accept in cold blood what it would be impossible for them to accord to a more intimate and emotional demand."

"No doubt an ethical distinction," he said, "but not very clear to me."

"I did not argue that such women are admirable or excusable. . . . But how many modern marriages in our particular vicinity are marriages of inclination, Ricky?"

"You're a washed-out lot," he said—"you're satiated as schoolgirls. If you have any emotions left they're twisted ones by the time you are introduced. Most débutantes of your sort make their bow equipped for business, and with the experience of what, practically, has amounted to several seasons.

"If any old-fashioned young girls remain in your orbit I don't know where to find them. Why, do you suppose any young girl, not yet out, would bother to go to a party of any sort where there was not champagne and a theatre-box and a supper in prospect? That's a fine comment on your children, Molly, but you know it's true and so does everybody who pretends to know anything about it."

"You talk like Karl Westguard," she said, laughing. "Anyway, what has all this to do with you and Strelsa Leeds?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "She is part of your last word in social civilisation——"

"She is a very normal, sensitive, proud girl, who has known little except unhappiness all her life, Rix—including two years of marital misery—two years of

horror.—And you forget that those two years were the result of a demand purely and brutally emotional—to which, a novice, utterly ignorant, she yielded—pushed on by her mother. . . . Please be fair to her; remember that her childhood was pinched with poverty, that her girlhood in school was a lonely one, embarrassed by lack of everything which her fashionable schoolmates had as matters of course.

"She could not go to the homes of her schoolmates in vacation times, because she could not ask them, in turn, to her own. She was still in school when Reggie Leeds saw her—and misbehaved—and the poor little thing was sent home, guiltless but already half-damned. No wonder her mother chased Reggie Leeds half around the world dragging her daughter by the wrist!"

"Did it make matters any better to force that drunken cad into a marriage?" asked Quarren coldly.

"It makes another marriage possible for Strelsa."

Quarren gazed out across the country where a fine misty rain was still falling. Acres of clover stretched away silvered with powdery moisture; robins and bluebirds covered the soaked lawns, and their excited call-notes prophesied blue skies.

"It doesn't make any difference one way or the other," said Quarren, half to himself. "She will go on in the predestined orbit——"

"Not if a stronger body pulls her out of it."

"There is nothing to which she responds—except what I have not."

"Make what you do possess more powerful, then."

"What do I possess?"

"Kindness. And also manhood, Ricky. Don't you?"

"Perhaps so—now—after a fashion. . . . But I am not the man who could ever attract her——"

"Wake her, and find out."

"Wake her?"

"Didn't I tell you that many of us are asleep, and that few of us awake easily? Didn't I tell you that nobody likes to be awakened from the warm comfort and idle security of emotionless slumber?—that it is the instinct of many of us to resist—just as I hear my maid speak to me in the morning and then turn over for another forty winks, hating her!"

They both laughed.

"My maid has instructions to persist until I respond," said Molly. "Those are my instructions to you, also."

"Suppose, after all, I were knocking at the door of an empty room?"

"You must take your chances of course."

There was a noise of horses on the gravel: Langly cantered up on a handsome hunter followed by a mounted groom leading Strelsa's mare.

Sprowl dismounted and came up to pay his respects to Molly, scarcely troubling himself to recognise Quarren's presence, and turning his back to him immediately, although Molly twice attempted to include him in the conversation.

Strelsa in the library, pulling on her gloves, was silent witness to a pantomime unmistakable; but her pretty lips merely pressed each other tighter, and she sauntered out, crop under one arm, with a careless greeting to Langly.

He came up offering his hand and she took it, then

"Strelsa in the library, pulling on her gloves, was silent witness to a pantomime unmistakable."

stood a moment in desultory conversation, facing the others so as to include Quarren.

"I thought I overheard you say to Molly that you were going back to town this afternoon," she remarked, casting a brief glance in his direction.

"I think I'd better go," he said, pleasantly.

"A matter of business I suppose?" eyebrows slightly lifted.

"In a way. Dankmere is alone, poor fellow."

Molly laughed:

"It is not good for man to be alone."

Sprowl said:

"There's a housemaid in my employ—she's saved something I understand. You might notify Dankmere—" he half wheeled toward Quarren, eyes slightly bulging without a shadow of expression on his sleek, narrow face.

Molly flushed; Quarren glanced at Sprowl, amazed at his insolence out of a clear sky.

"What?" he said slowly—then stepped back a pace as Strelsa passed close in front of him, apparently perfectly unconscious of any discord:

"Will you get me a lump of sugar, Mr. Quarren? My mare must be pampered or she'll start that jiggling Kentucky amble and never walk one step."

Quarren swung on his heel and entered the house; Molly, ignoring Strelsa, turned sharply on Sprowl:

"If you are insolent to my guests you need not come here," she said briefly.

Langly's restless eyes protruded; he glanced from Molly to Strelsa, then his indifferent gaze wandered over the landscape. It was plain that the rebuke had not made the slightest impression. Molly looked angrily at

Strelsa, but the latter, eyes averted, was gazing at her horse. And when Quarren came back with a handful of sugar she took it and, descending the steps, fed it, lump by lump to the two horses.

Langly put her up, shouldered aside the groom, and adjusted heel-loop and habit-loop. Then he mounted, saluted Molly and followed Strelsa at a canter without even noticing his bridle.

"What have you done to Langly?" asked Molly.

"Characterised his bad manners the other day. It wasn't worth while; there's no money in cursing. . . . And I think, Molly dear, that I'll take an afternoon train——"

"I won't let you," said his hostess. "I won't have you treated that way under my roof——"

"It was outdoors, dear lady," said Quarren, smiling. "It's only his rudeness before you that I mind. Where is Sir Charles?"

"Off with Chrysos somewhere on the river—there's their motor-launch, now. . . . Ricky!"

"Yes."

"I'm angry all through. . . . Strelsa might have said something—showed her lack of sympathy for Langly's remark by being a little more cordial to you. . . . I don't like it in her. I don't know whether I am going to like that girl or not——"

"Nonsense. There was nothing for her to say or do——"

"There was! She *is* a fish!—unless she gives Langly the dickens this morning. . . . Will you motor with Jim and me, Ricky dear?"

"If you like."

She did like. So presently a racing car was brought

around, Jim came reluctantly from the hangar, and away they tore into the dull weather now faintly illuminated by the prophecy of the sun.

Everywhere the mist was turning golden; faint smears of blue appeared and disappeared through the vapours passing overhead. Then, all at once the sun's glaring lens played across the drenched meadows, and the shadows of tree and hedge and standing cattle streamed out across the herbage.

In spite of the chains the car skidded dangerously at times; mud flew and so did water, and very soon Molly had enough. So they tore back again to the house, Molly to change her muddy clothes and write letters, her husband to return to his beloved Stinger, Quarren to put on a pair of stout shoes and heather spats and go wandering off cross-lots—past woodlands still dripping with golden rain from every leaf, past tiny streams swollen amber where mint and scented grasses swayed half immersed; past hedge and orchard and wild tangles ringing with bird music—past fields of young crops of every kind washed green and fresh above the soaking brown earth.

Swallows settled on the wet road around every puddle; bluebirds fluttered among the fruit trees; the strident battle note of the kingbird was heard, the unlovely call of passing grackle, the loud enthusiasm of nesting robins. Everywhere a rain-cleansed world resounded with the noises of lesser life, flashed with its colour in a million blossoms and in the delicately brilliant wings hovering over them.

Far away he could see the river and the launch, too, where Sir Charles and Chrysos Lacy were circling hither and thither at full speed. Once, across a distant hill,

two horses and their riders passed outlined against the sky; but even the eyes of a lover and a hater could not identify anybody at such a distance.

So he strolled on, taking roads when convenient, fields when it suited him, neither knowing nor caring where he was going.

Avoiding a big house amid brand-new and very showy landscape effects he turned aside into a pretty strip of woods; and presently came to a little foot-bridge over a stream.

A man sat there, reading, and as Quarren passed, he looked up.

"Is that you, Quarren?" he said.

The young fellow stopped and looked down curiously at the sunken, unhealthy face, then, shocked, came forward hastily and shook hands.

"Why, Ledwith," he said, "what are you doing here?—Oh, I forgot; you live here, don't you?"

"That's my house yonder—or was," said the man with a slight motion of his head. And, after a moment: "You didn't recognise me. Have I changed much?"

Quarren said: "You seem to have been—ill."

"Yes; I have been. I'm ill, all right. . . . Will you have a seat for a few minutes—unless you are going somewhere in particular—or don't care to talk to me——"

"Thank you." Quarren seated himself. It was his instinct to be gentle—even with such a man.

"I haven't seen much of you, for a couple of years—I haven't seen much of anybody," said Ledwith, turning the pages of his book without looking at them. Then, furtively, his sunken eyes rested a moment on Quarren:

"You are stopping with——"

"The Wycherlys."

"Oh, yes. . . . I haven't seen them lately. . . . They are neighbours"—he waved his sickly coloured hand—"but I'm rather quiet—I read a good deal—as you see"—He moistened his bluish lips every few moments, and his nose seemed to annoy him, too, for he rubbed it continually.

"It's a pretty country," said Quarren.

"Yes—I thought so once. I built that house. . . . There's no use in my keeping up social duties," he said with another slinking glance at Quarren. "So I'm giving up the house."

"Really."

"Hasn't—you have heard so, haven't you?"

He kept twitching his shoulders and shifting his place continually, and his fingers were never still, always at the leaves of his book or rubbing his face which seemed to itch; or he snapped them nervously and continuously as he jerked about in his seat.

"I suppose," he said slyly, "people talk about me, Quarren."

"Do you know anybody immune to gossip?" inquired Quarren, smiling.

"No; that's true. But I don't care anything for people. . . . I read, I have my horses and dogs—but I'm going to move away. I told you that, didn't I?"

"I believe you did."

Ledwith stared at his book with lack-lustre eyes, then, almost imperceptibly shifted his gaze craftily askance:

"There's no use pretending to *you*, Quarren; is there?"

Quarren said nothing.

"You know all the gossip—all the dirty little faits divers of your world. And you're a sort of doctor and confidential——"

"You're mistaken, Ledwith," he said pleasantly. "I'm done with it."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, that I've gone into a better business and I'm too busy to be useful and amusing any longer."

Ledwith's dead eyes stared:

"I heard you had dropped out—were never seen about. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Found the game too rotten?"

"Oh, no. It's no different from any other game—a mixture of the same old good and bad, with good predominating. But there's more to be had out of life in other games."

"Yours is slipping phony pictures to the public, with Dankmere working as side partner, isn't it?"

Quarren said pleasantly: "If you're serious, Ledwith, you're a liar."

After a silence Ledwith said: "Do you think there's enough left of me to care what anybody calls me?"

Quarren turned: "I beg your pardon, Ledwith; I had no business to make you such an answer."

"Never mind. . . . In that last year—when I still knew people—and when they still knew me—you were very kind to me, Quarren."

"Why not? You were always decent to me."

Ledwith was now picking at his fingers, and Quarren saw that they were dreadfully scarred and maltreated.

"You've always been kind to me," repeated Led-

with, his extinct eyes fixed on space. "Other people would have halted at sight of me and gone the other way—or passed by cutting me dead. . . . *You* sat down beside me."

"Am I anybody to refuse?"

But Ledwith only blinked nervously down at his book, presently fell to twitching the uncut pages again.

"Poems," he said—"scarcely what you'd think I'd wish to read, Quarren—poems of youth and love——"

"You're young, Ledwith—if you cared to help yourself——"

"Yes, if I cared—if I cared. In this book they all seem to care; youth and happiness care; sorrow and years still care. Listen to this:

> "'You who look forward through the shining tears
> Of April's showers
> Into the sunrise of the coming years
> Golden with unborn flowers—
> I who look backward where the sunset lowers
> Counting November's hours!'

"But—I *don't* care. I care no longer, Quarren."

"*That's* losing your grip."

He raised his ashy visage: "I'm *trying* to let go. . . . But it's slow—very slow—with a little pleasure—hell's own pleasure—" He turned his shoulder, fished something out of his pocket, and pulling back his cuff, bent over. After a few moments he turned around, calmly:

"You've seen that on the stage I fancy."

"Otherwise, also."

"Quite likely. I've known a pretty woman—" He

ended with a weary gesture and dropped his head between his hands.

"Quarren," he said, "there's only one hurt left in it all. I have two little children."

Quarren was silent.

"I suppose—it won't last—that hurt. They're with my mother. It was agreed that they should remain with her. . . . But it's the only hurt I feel at all now—except—rarely—when those damned June roses are in bloom. . . . She wore them a good deal. . . . Quarren, I'm glad it came early to me if it had to come. . . . Like yellow dogs unsuccessful men are the fastest breeders. The man in permanent hard luck is always the most prolific. . . . I'm glad there are no more children."

His sunken eyes fell to the book, and, thinking of his wife, he read what was not written there—

"Her loveliness with shame and with surprise
Froze my swift speech; she turning on my face
The star-like sorrows of immortal eyes,
Spoke slowly.

"'I had great beauty; ask thou not my name;
No one can be more wise than destiny.
Many drew swords and died. Where'er I came
I brought calamity.'"

Quarren bit his lip and looked down at the sunlit brook dancing by under the bridge in amber beauty.

Ledwith said musingly: "I don't know who it might have been if it had not been Sprowl. It would have been *somebody!* . . . The decree has been made absolute."

Quarren looked up.

"She's coming back here soon, now. I've had the place put in shape for her."

After a silence Quarren rose and offered his hand.

Ledwith took it: "I suppose I shall not see you again?"

"I'm going to town this afternoon. Good-bye."

Looking back at the turn of the path he saw Ledwith, bent nearly double, terribly intent on his half-bared arm.

Returning in time for luncheon he encountered Sir Charles fresh from the river, and Chrysos prettily sunburned, just entering the house.

"We broke down," said the girl; "I thought we'd never get back, but Sir Charles is quite wonderful and he mended that very horrid machinery with the point of a file. Think of it, Ricky!—the point of a file!"

Sir Charles laughed and explained the simplicity of the repairs; and Chrysos, not a whit less impressed, stared at him out of her pretty golden eyes with a gaze perilously resembling adoration.

Afterward, by the bay-window upstairs, Quarren said lightly to Molly:

"How about the little Lacy girl and the Baronet?"

"She's an idiot," said Molly, shortly.

"I'm afraid she is."

"Of course she is. I wish I hadn't asked her. Why, she goes about like a creature in a trance when Sir Charles is away. . . . I don't know whether to say anything to her or whether to write to her mother. She's slated for Roger O'Hara."

"I don't suppose her parents would object to Sir Charles," said Quarren, smiling.

"That's why I hesitate to write. Sir Charles is in love with Strelsa; anybody can see that and everybody knows it. And it isn't likely that a child like Chrysos could swerve him."

"Then you'd better send him or her away, hadn't you?"

"I don't know what to do," said Molly, vexed. "June is to be quiet and peaceful at Witch-Hollow, and Sir Charles wanted to be here and Mrs. Lacy asked me to have Chrysos because she needed the quiet and calm. And *look* what she's done!"

"It's probably only a young girl's fancy."

"Then it ought to be nipped in the bud. But her mother wants her here and Sir Charles wants to be here and if I write to her mother she'll let her remain anyway. I'm cross, Ricky. I'm tired, too—having dictated letters and signed checks until my head aches. Where have you been?"

"Prowling."

"Well, luncheon is nearly ready, and Strelsa isn't back. Are you going to New York this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Please don't."

"I think it's better," he said lightly.

"All right. Run away if you want to. Don't say another word to me; I'm irritated."

Luncheon was not very gay; Chrysos adored Sir Charles in silence, but so sweetly and unobtrusively that the Baronet was totally unaware of it. Molly, frankly out of temper, made no effort of any sort; her husband in his usual rude health and spirits talked about the Stinger to everybody. Strelsa, who had arrived late, and whose toilet made her later still, seemed inclined

to be rather cheerful and animated, but received little encouragement from Molly.

However, she chatted gaily with Sir Charles and with Quarren, and after luncheon invited Sir Charles to read to her and Chrysos, which the grave and handsome Englishman did while they swung in old-fashioned hammocks under the maple trees, enjoying the rare treat of hearing their own language properly spoken.

Molly had a book to herself on the veranda—the newest and wickedest of French yellow-covered fiction; her husband returned to the Stinger; Quarren listened to Sir Charles for a while, then without disturbing the reading, slipped quietly off and wandered toward the kennels.

Here for a while he caressed the nervous, silky Blue Beltons, then strolled on toward the hemlock woods, a morning paper, still unread, sticking out of his pocket.

When he came to the rustic seat which was his objective, he lighted his pipe, unfolded the paper, and forced his attention on the first column.

How long he had been studying the print he did not know when, glancing up at the sound of footsteps on the dry leaves, he saw Strelsa coming in his direction. He could see her very plainly through the hemlocks from where he sat but she could not as yet see him. Then the fat waddling dog ahead of her, barked; and he saw the girl stop short, probably divining that the rustic seat was occupied.

For a few moments she stood there, perhaps waiting for her dog to return; but that fat sybarite had his chin on Quarren's knees; and, presently, Strelsa moved forward, slowly, already certain who it was ahead of her.

Quarren rose as she came around the curve in the path:

"If you don't want me here I'm quite willing to retire," he said, pleasantly.

"That is a ridiculous thing to say," she commented. Then she seated herself and motioned him to resume his place.

"I was rather wondering," she continued, "whether I'd see you before you leave."

"Oh, are you driving this afternoon?"

"No."

"Then I should certainly have looked for you and made my adieux."

"Would you have remembered to do it?"

He laughed:

"What a question! I might possibly forget my own name, but not anything concerning you."

She looked down at the paper lying between them on the bench, and, still looking down, said slowly:

"I am sorry for what Langly did this morning. . . . He has expressed his contrition to me——"

"*That* is all right as long as he doesn't express it to me," interrupted Quarren, bluntly.

"He means to speak to you——"

"Please say to him that your report of his mental anguish is sufficient."

"*Are* you vindictive, Mr. Quarren?" she asked, reddening.

"Not permanently. But I either like or I dislike. So let the incident close quietly."

"Very well — if you care to humiliate me — him——"

"Dear Mrs. Leeds, he isn't going to be humiliated,

because he doesn't care. And you know I wouldn't humiliate you for all the world——"

"You will unless you let Langly express his formal regrets to you——"

He looked up at her:

"Would *that* make it easier for you?"

"I—perhaps—please do as you see fit, Mr. Quarren."

"Very well," he said quietly.

He caressed the dog's head where it lay across his knees, and looked out over the water. Breezes crinkled the surface in every direction and wind-blown dragonflies glittered like swift meteors darting athwart the sun.

She said in a low voice: "I hope your new business venture will be successful."

"I know you do. It is very sweet of you to care."

"I care—greatly. . . . As much as I—dare."

He laughed: "Don't you dare care about me?"

She bit her lip: "I have found it slightly venturesome on one or two occasions."

"So you don't really dare express your kindly regard for me fearing I might again mistake it for something deeper." He was still laughing, and she lifted her gray eyes in silence for a moment, then:

"There is nothing in the world deeper than my regard for you—if you will let it be what it is, and seek to make nothing less spiritual out of it."

"Do you mean that?" he asked, his face altering.

"Mean it? Why of course I do, Mr. Quarren."

"I thought I spoiled that for both of us," he said.

"I didn't say so. I told you that I didn't know

what you had done. I've had time to reflect. It—our friendship isn't spoiled—if you still value it."

"I value it above everything in the world, Strelsa."

There was a silence. The emotion in his face and voice was faintly reflected in hers.

"Then let us have peace," she said unsteadily. "I have—been—not very happy since you—since we——"

"I know. I've been utterly miserable, too." He lifted one of her hands and kissed it, and she changed colour but left her hand lying inert in his.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

"N-no."

He laid his lips to her fingers again; she stirred uneasily, then rested her other arm on the back of the seat and shaded her eyes.

"I think—you had better not—touch me—any more—" she said faintly.

"Is it disagreeable?"

"Yes—n-no. . . . It is—it has nothing to do with friendship—" she looked up, flushed, curious: "Why do you always want to touch me, Mr. Quarren?"

"Did you never caress a flower?"

"Rix!"—she caught her breath as his name escaped her for the first time, and he saw her face surging in the loveliest colour. "It was your nonsensical answer!—I —it took me by surprise . . . and I ask your pardon for being stupid. . . . And—may I have my hand? I use it occasionally."

He quietly reversed it, laid his lips to the palm, and released her fingers.

"Strelsa," he said, "I'm coming back into the battle again."

"Then I am sorry I forgave you."

"*Are* you?"

"Yes, I am. Yes, yes, yes! Why can't you be to me what I wish to be to you? Why can't you be what I want—what I need——"

"Do you know what you need?"

"Yes, I——"

"No, you don't. You need to love—and to be loved. You don't know it, but you do!"

"That is a—a perfectly brutal thing to say——"

"Does it sound so to you?"

"Yes, it does! It is brutal—common, unworthy of you and of me——"

He took both her hands in a grip that almost hurt her:

"*Can't* you have any understanding, any sympathy with human love? Can't you? Doesn't a man's love mean anything to you but words? Is there anything to be ashamed of in it?—merely because nothing has ever yet awakened *you* to it?"

"Nothing ever will," she said steadily. "The friendship you can have of me is more than love—cleaner, better, stronger——"

"It isn't strong enough to make you renounce what you are planning to do!"

"No."

"Yet love would be strong enough to make you renounce anything!"

She said calmly: "Call it by its right name. Yes, they say its slaves become irresponsible. I know nothing about it—I could not—I will not! I loathe and detest any hint of it—to me it is degrading—contemptible——"

"What are you saying?"

"I am telling you the truth," she retorted, pale, and breathing faster. "I'm telling you what I know—what I have learned in a bitter school—during two dreadful years——"

"*That!*"

"Yes, that! Now you know! Now perhaps you can understand why I crave friendship and hold anything less in horror! Why can't you be kind to me? You are the one man I could ask it of—the only man I ever saw who seemed fitted to give me what I want and need, and to whom I could return what he gave me with all my heart—all my heart——"

She bowed her face over the hands which he still held; suddenly he drew her close into his arms; and she rested so, her head against his shoulder.

"I won't *talk* to you of love any more," he whispered. "You poor little girl—you poor little thing. I didn't realise—I don't want to think about it——"

"I don't either," she said. "You will be kind to me, won't you?"

"Of course—of course—you little, little girl. Nobody is going to find fault with you, nobody is going to blame you or be unkind or hurt you or demand anything at all of you or tell you that you make mistakes. People are just going to like you, Strelsa, and you needn't love them if you don't want to. You shall feel about everything exactly as you please—about Tom, Dick, and Harry and about me, too."

Her hot face against his shoulder was quivering.

"There," he whispered—"there, there—you little, little girl. That's all I want of you after all—only what you want of me. I don't wish to marry you if you don't wish it; I won't—I perhaps couldn't really love

you very deeply if you didn't respond. I shall not bother you any more—or worry or nag or insist. What you do is right as far as I am concerned; what you offer I take; and whenever you find yourself unable to respond to anything I offer, say so fearlessly—look so, even, and I'll understand. Is all well between us now, Strelsa?"

"Yes. . . . You are so good. . . . I wanted this. . . . You don't mean anything, do you by—by your arm around me——"

"No more than your face against my shoulder means." He smiled—"Which I suppose signifies merely that you feel very secure with me."

"I—begin to. . . . Will you let me?"

"Yes. . . . Do you feel restless? Do you want to lift your head?"

She moved a little but made no reply. He could see only the full, smooth curve of her cheek against his shoulder. It was rather colourless.

"I believe you are worn out," he said.

"I have not rested for weeks."

"On account of that Trust business?"

"Yes. . . . But I was tired before that—I had done too much—lived too much—and I've felt as though I were being hunted for so long. . . . And then—I was unhappy about you."

"Because I had joined in the hunt," he said.

"You were different, but—you made me feel that way, too—a little——"

"I understand now."

"Do you really?"

"Yes. It's been a case of men following, crowding after you, urging, importuning you to consider their

desires—to care for them in their own way—all sorts I suppose, sad and sentimental, eager and exacting, headlong and boisterous—all at you constantly to give them what is not in you to give—what has never been awakened—what lies stunned, crippled, perhaps mangled in its sleep——"

"Killed," she whispered.

"Perhaps." He raised his eyes and looked absently out across the sparkling water. Sunlight slanted on his shoulder and her hair, gilding the nape of her white neck where the hair grew blond and fine as a child's. And like a child, still confused by memories of past terror, partly quieted yet still sensitive to every sound or movement, Strelsa lay close to the arm that sheltered her, thinking, wondering that she could endure it, and all the while conscious that the old fear of him was no longer there.

"Do you—know about me?" she asked in a still, low voice.

"About the past?"

"About my marriage."

"Yes."

"Everything?"

"Some things."

"You know what the papers said?"

"Yes. . . . Don't speak of it—unless you care to, Strelsa."

"I want to. . . . Do you know this is the first time?"

"Is it?"

"The first time I have ever spoken of it to anybody. . . . As long as my mother lived I did not once speak of it to her."

She rested in silence for a while, then:

"Could I tell you?"

"My dear, my dear!—of course you can."

"I—it's been unsaid so long—there was nobody to tell it to. I've done my best to forget it—and for days I seem to forget it. But sometimes when I wake at night it is there—the horror of it—the terror sinking deeper into my breast. . . . I was very young. You knew that?"

"Yes."

"You knew my mother had very slender means?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't have cared; I was an imaginative child—and could have lived quite happy with my fancies on very, very little. . . . I was a sensitive and affectionate child—inclined to be demonstrative. You wouldn't believe it, would you?"

"I can understand it."

"Can you? It's odd because I have changed so. . . . I was quite romantic about my mother—madly in love with her. . . . There is nothing more to say. . . . In boarding-school I was perfectly aware that I was being given the best grooming that we could afford. Even then romance persisted. I had the ideas of a coloured picture-book concerning men and love and marriage. I remember, as a very little child, that I had a picture-book showing Cinderella's wedding. It was a very golden sort of picture. It coloured my ideas long after I was grown up."

She moved her head a little, looked up for an instant and smiled; but at his answering smile she turned her cheek to his shoulder, hastily, and lay silent for a while. Presently she continued in a low voice:

"It was when we were returning for the April vacation—and the platform was crowded and some of the girls' brothers were there. There were two trains in —and much confusion—I don't know how I became separated from Miss Buckley and my schoolmates—I don't know to this day how I found myself on the Baltimore train, and Gladys Leeds's brother laughing and talking and the train moving faster and faster. . . . There is no use saying any more. I was as ignorant as I was innocent—a perfect little fool, frightened, excited, even amused by turns. . . . He had been attentive to me. We both were fools. Only finally I became badly scared and he talked such nonsense—and I managed to slip away from him and board the train at Baltimore as soon as we arrived there. . . . If he hadn't found me and returned to New York with me, it might not have been known. But we were recognised on the train and —it was a dreadful thing for me when I arrived home after midnight. . . ."

She fell silent; once or twice he looked down at her and saw that her eyes were closed. Then, with a quick, uneven breath:

"I think you know the rest, don't you?"

"I think so."

But she went on in a low, emotionless voice: "I was treated like a damaged gown—for which depreciation in value somebody was to be made responsible. I suffered; days and nights seemed unreal. There were lawyers; did you know it?"

"No."

"Yes," she said wearily, "it was a bad dream—my mother, others—*his* family—many people strange and familiar passed through it. Then we travelled; I saw

nothing, feeling half dead. . . . We were married in the Hawaiian Islands."

"I know."

"Then—the two years began."

After a long while she said again: "That was the real nightmare. I passed through the depths as in a trance. There was nothing lower, not even hell. . . . We travelled in Europe, Africa, and India for two years. . . . I scarcely remember a soul I saw or one single object. And then—*that* happened."

"I know, dear."

A slight shudder passed over her:

"I've told you," she whispered—"I've told you at last. Shall I tell you more?"

"Not unless——"

"I don't know whether I want to—about the gendarmes—and that terrible woman who screamed when they touched her with the handcuffs—and how ill I was——"

She had begun to tremble so perceptibly that Quarren's arm tightened around her; and presently she became limp and motionless.

"This—what I have told you—is a very close bond between us, isn't it?" she said.

"Very close, Strelsa."

"Was I much to blame?"

"No."

"How much?"

"You should have left him long before."

"Why, he was my husband! I had made a contract; I had to keep it and make the best of it."

"Is that your idea?"

"That was all I could see to do about it."

"Don't you believe in divorce?"

"Yes; but I thought he'd be killed; I thought he was a little insane. If he'd been well mentally and merely cruel and brutal I would have left him. But one can't abandon a helpless person."

"Every word you utter," he said, "forges a new link in my love for you."

"You don't mean—love?"

"We mean the same I think—differing only in degree."

"Thank you. That is nice of you."

He nodded, smiling to himself; then, graver:

"Is your little fortune quite gone, Strelsa?"

"All gone—all of it."

"I see. . . . And something has got to be done."

"You know it has. . . . And I'm old before my time—tired, worn out. I can't work—I have no heart, no courage. My heart and strength were burnt out; I haven't the will to struggle; I have no capacity to endure. What am I to do?"

"Not what you plan to do."

"Why not? As long as I need help—and the best is offered——"

"Wouldn't you take less—and me?"

"Oh, Rix! I couldn't *use you!*"

She turned and looked up at him, blushed, and disengaged herself from his arm.

"I—I—you are my *friend.* I couldn't do that. I have nothing to give anybody—not even you." She smiled, tremulously—"And I suspect that as far as your fortune is concerned, you can offer me little more. . . . But it's sweet of you. You *are* generous, having so little and wishing to share it with me——"

"Could you wait for me, Strelsa?"

"Wait? You mean until you become wealthy? Why, you dear boy, how can I?—even if it were a certainty."

"Can't you hold on for a couple of years?"

"Please tell me how? Why, I can't even pay my attorneys until I sell my house."

He bit his lip and frowned at the sunlit water.

"Besides," she said, "I haven't anything to offer you that I haven't already given you——"

"I ask no more."

"Oh, but you *do!*"

"No, I want only what you want, Strelsa—only what you have to offer of your own accord."

They fell silent, leaning forward on their knees, eyes absent, remote.

"I don't see how it can be done; do you?" she said.

"If you could wait——"

"But Rix; I've told him that I would marry him."

"Does that count?"

"Yes—I don't know. I don't know how dishonest I might be. . . . I don't know what is going to happen. I'm so poor, Rix—you don't realise—and I'm tired and sad—old before my time—perplexed, burnt out——"

She rested her head on one slender curved hand and closed her eyes. After a while she opened them with a weary smile.

"I'll try to think—after you are gone. . . . What time does your train leave?"

He glanced at his watch and rose; and she sprang up, too:

"*Have* I kept you too long?"

"No; I can make it. We'll have to walk rather fast——"

"I'd rather you left me here."

"Would you? Then—good-bye——"

"Good-bye. . . . Will you come up again?"

"I'll try."

"Shall we write?"

"Will you?"

"Yes. I have so much to say, now that you are going. I am glad you came. I am glad I told you everything. Please believe that my heart is enlisted in your new enterprise; that I pray for your success and welfare and happiness. Will you always remember that?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then—I mustn't keep you a moment longer. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

They stood a moment, neither stirring; then he put his arms around her; she touched his shoulder once more, lightly with her cheek—a second's contact; then he kissed her clasped hands and was gone.

CHAPTER XI

Quarren arrived in town about twilight. Taxis were no longer for him nor he for them. Suit-case and walking-stick in hand, he started up Lexington Avenue still excited and exhilarated from his leave-taking with Strelsa. An almost imperceptible fragrance seemed to accompany him, freshening the air around him in the shabby streets of Ascalon; the heat-cursed city grew cooler, sweeter for her memory. Through the avenue's lamp-lit dusk passed the pale ghosts of Gath and the phantoms of the Philistines, and he thought their shadowy forms moved less wearily; and that strange faces looked less wanly at him as they grew out of the night —"clothed in scarlet and ornaments of gold"—and dissolved again into darkness.

Still thrilled, almost buoyant, he walked on, passing the high-piled masonry of the branch Post-Office and the Central Palace on his left. Against high stars the twin Power-House chimneys stood outlined in steel; on the right endless blocks of brown-stone dwellings stretched northward, some already converted into shops where print-sellers, dealers in old books, and here and there antiquaries, had constructed show-windows.

Firemen lounged outside the Eighth Battalion quarters; here and there a grocer's or wine-seller's windows remained illuminated where those who were neither well-

to-do nor very poor passed to and fro with little packages which seemed a burden under the sultry skies.

At last, ahead, the pseudo-oriental towers of a synagogue varied the flat skyline, and a moment later he could see the New Thought Laundry, the Tonsorial Drawing Rooms, the Undertaker's discreetly illuminated windows, and finally the bay-window of his own recent Real-Estate office, now transmogrified into the Dankmere Galleries of Old Masters, Fayre and Quarren, proprietors.

The window appeared to be brilliantly illuminated behind the drawn curtains; and Quarren, surprised and vexed, concluded that the little Englishman was again entertaining. So it perplexed and astonished him to find the Earl sitting on the front steps, his straw hat on the back of his head, smoking. At the same moment from within the house a confused and indescribable murmur was wafted to his ears as though many people were applauding.

"What on earth is going on inside?" he asked, bewildered.

"You told me over the telephone that Karl Westguard might have the gallery for this evening," said the Englishman calmly. "So I let him have it."

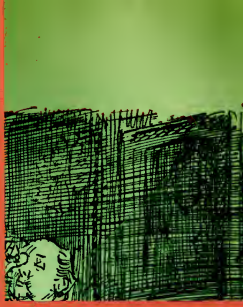
"What did he want of it? Who has he got in there?"—demanded Quarren as another ripple of applause sounded from within.

Dankmere thought a moment: "I really don't know the audience, Quarren—they're not a very fragrant lot."

"What audience? Who are they?"

"You Americans would call them a tough-looking

"A high and soulful tenor voice



bunch—except Westguard and Bleecker De Groot and Mrs. Caldera——"

"Cyrille Caldera and De Groot! What's that silly old Dandy doing down here?"

"Diffusing sweetness and light among the unwashed; telling them that there are no such things as classes, that wealth is no barrier to brotherhood, that the heart of Fifth Avenue beats as warmly and guilelessly as the heart of Essex Street, and that its wealth-burdened inhabitants have long desired to fraternise with the benchers in Paradise Park."

"Who put Westguard up to this?" asked Quarren, aghast.

"De Groot. Karl is writing a levelling novel calculated to annihilate caste. The Undertaker next door furnished the camp-chairs; the corner grocer the collation; Westguard, Mrs. Caldera, and Bleecker De Groot the mind-food. Go in and look 'em over."

The front door was standing partly open; the notes of a piano floated through; a high and soulful tenor voice was singing "Perfumes of Araby," but Quarren did not notice any as he stepped inside.

Not daring to leave his suit-case in the hallway he kept on along the passage to the extension where the folding doors were locked. Here he deposited his luggage, locked the door, then walked back to the front parlour and, unobserved, slipped in, seating himself among the battered derelicts of the rear row.

A thin, hirsute young man had just finished scattering the perfumes of Araby; other perfumes nearly finished Quarren; but he held his ground and gazed grimly at an improvised platform where sat in a half-circle and in full evening dress, Karl Westguard, Cyrille Caldera

and Bleecker De Groot. Also there was a table supporting a Calla lily.

Westguard was saying very earnestly: "The world calls me a novelist. I am not! Thank Heaven, I aspire to something loftier. I am not a mere scribbler of fiction; I am a man with a message—a plain, simple, earnest, warm-hearted humanitarian who has been roused to righteous indignation by the terrible contrast in this miserable city between wealth and poverty——"

"That's right," interrupted a hoarse voice; "it's all a con game, an' the perlice is into it, too!"

"T'hell wit te bulls! Croak 'em!" observed another gentleman thickly.

Westguard, slightly discountenanced by the significant cheers which greeted this sentiment, introduced Bleecker De Groot; and the rotund old Beau came jauntily forward, holding out both immaculate hands with an artlessly comprehensive gesture calculated to make the entire East Side feel that it was reposing upon his beautifully laundered bosom.

"Ah, my friends!" cried De Groot, "if you could only realise how great is the love for humanity within my breast!—If you could only know of the hours and days and even weeks that I have devoted to solving the problems of the poor!

"And I *have* solved them—every one. And *this* is the answer!"—grasping dauntlessly at a dirty hand and shaking it—"this!" seizing another—"and this, and this! And now I ask you, *what* is this mute answer which I have given you?"

"De merry mitt," said a voice, promptly. Mr. De Groot smiled with sweetness and indulgence.

"I apprehend your quaint and trenchant vernacu-

lar," he said. "It *is* the 'merry mitt'—the 'glad glove,' the 'happy hand'! Fifth Avenue clasps palms with Doyers Street——"

"Ding!" said a weary voice, "yer in wrong, boss. It's nix f'r the Tongs wit us gents. We transfer to Avenue A."

Mr. De Groot merely smiled indulgently. "The rich," he said, "are not really happy." His plump, highly coloured features altered; presently a priceless tear glimmered in his monocle eye; and he brushed it away with a kind of noble pity for his own weakness.

"Dear, dear friends," he said tremulously, "believe me—oh, believe me that the rich are not happy! Only the perspiring labourer knows what is true contentment. The question of poverty is a great social question. With me it is a religion. Oh, I could go on forever on this subject, dear friends, and talk on and on and on——"

Emotion again checked him—or perhaps he had lost the thread of his discourse—or possibly he had attained its limit—but he filled it out by coming down from the platform and shaking hands so vigorously that the gardenia in his lapel presently fell out.

Cyrille Caldera rose, fresh and dainty and smiling, and discoursed single-tax and duplex tenements, getting the two subjects mixed but not minding that. Also she pointed at the Calla lily and explained that the lily was the emblem of purity. Which may have had something to do with something or other.

Then Westguard arose once more and told them all about the higher type of novel he was writing for humanity's sake, and became so interested and absorbed in

his own business that the impatient shuffling of shabby feet on the floor alone interrupted him.

"Has anybody," inquired De Groot, sweetly, "any vital question to ask—any burning inquiry of deeper, loftier import, which has perhaps long remained unanswered in his heart?"

A gentleman known usually as "Mike the Mink" arose and indicated with derisive thumb a picture among the Dankmere collection, optimistically attributed to Correggio:

"Is that Salome, mister?" he inquired with a leer.

De Groot looked at the canvas, slightly startled.

"No, my dear friend; that is a picture painted hundreds of years ago by a great Italian master. It is called 'Danaë.' Jupiter, you know, came to her in a shower of gold——"

"They all have to come across with it," remarked the Mink.

Somebody observed that if the police caught the dago who painted it they'd pinch him.

To make a diversion, and with her own fair hands, Cyrille Caldera summoned the derelicts to sandwiches and ginger-ale; and De Groot, dashing more unmanly moisture from his monocle, went about resolutely shaking hands, while Westguard and the hirsute young man sang "Comrades" with much feeling.

Quarren, still unrecognised, edged his way out and rejoined Dankmere on the front stoop. Neither made any comment on the proceedings.

Later the derelicts, moodily replete, shuffled forth into the night, herded lovingly by De Groot, still shaking hands.

From the corner of the street opposite, Quarren and

Dankmere observed their departure, and, later, they beheld De Groot and Mrs. Caldera slip around the block and discreetly disappear into a 1912 touring-car with silver mountings and two men in livery on the box.

Westguard, truer to his principles, took a tram and Quarren and the Earl returned to their gallery with mixed emotions, and opened every window top and bottom.

"It's all right in its way, I suppose," said Quarren. "Probably De Groot means well, but there's no conversation possible between a man who has just dined rather heavily, and a man who has no chance of dining at all."

"Like preaching Christ to the poor from a Fifth Avenue pulpit," said Dankmere, vaguely.

"How do you mean?"

"A church on a side street would seem to serve the purpose. And the poor need the difference."

"I don't know about those matters."

"No; I don't either. It's easy, cheap, and popular to knock the clergy. . . . Still, somehow or other, I can't seem to forget that the disciples were poor—and it bothers me a lot, Quarren."

Quarren said: "Haven't you and I enough to worry us concerning our own morals?"

Dankmere, who had been closing up and piling together the Undertaker's camp-chairs, looked around at the younger man.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said that probably you and I would find no time left to criticise either De Groot or the clergy, if we used our leisure in self-examination."

His lordship went on piling up chairs. When he finished he started wandering around, hands in his pock-

ets. Then he turned out all the electric lamps, drew the bay-window curtains wide so that the silvery radiance from the arc-light opposite made the darkness dimly lustrous.

A little breeze stirred the hair on Quarren's forehead; Dankmere dropped into the depths of an armchair near him. For a while they sat together in darkness and silence, then the Englishman said abruptly:

"You've been very kind to me."

Quarren glanced up surprised.

"Why not?"

"Because nobody else has any decent words to say to me or of me."

Quarren, amused, said: "How do you know that *I* have, Dankmere?"

"A man knows some things. For example, most people take me for an ass—they don't tell me so but I know it. And if they don't take me for an ass they assume that I'm something worse—because I have a title of sorts, no money, an inclination for the stage and the people who make a living out of it."

"Also," Quarren reminded him, "you are looking for a wealthy wife."

"God bless my soul! Am I the only chap in America who happens to be doing that?"

"No; but you're doing it conspicuously."

"You mean I'm honest about it?"

Quarren laughed: "Anyway perhaps that's one reason why I like you. At first I also thought it was merely stupidity."

Dankmere crossed his short legs and lighted his pipe:

"The majority of your better people have managed

not to know me. I've met a lot of men of sorts, but they draw the line across their home thresholds—most of them. Is it the taint of vaudeville that their wives sniff at, or my rather celebrated indigence? "

"Both, Dankmere—and then some."

"Oh, I see. Many thanks for telling me. I take it you mean that it was my first wife they shy at."

Quarren remained silent.

"She was a bar-maid," remarked the Earl. "We were quite happy—until she died."

Quarren made a slight motion of comprehension.

"Of course my marrying her damned us both," observed the Earl.

"Of course."

"Quite so. People would have stood for anything else. . . . But she wouldn't—you may think it odd. . . . And I was in love—so there you are."

For a while they smoked in the semi-darkness without exchanging further speech; and finally Dankmere knocked out his pipe, pocketed it, and put on his hat.

"You know," he said, "I'm not really an ass. My tastes and my caste don't happen to coincide—that's all, Quarren."

They walked together to the front stoop.

"When do we open shop? " asked the Earl, briskly.

"As soon as I get the reports from our experts."

"Won't business be dead all summer? "

"We may do some business with agents and dealers."

"I see. You and I are to alternate as salesmen? "

"For a while. When things start I want to rent the basement and open a department for repairing, relining

and cleaning; and I'd like to be able to do some of the work myself."

"*You?*"

"Surely. It interests me immensely."

"You're welcome I'm sure," said Dankmere drily. "But who's to keep the books and attend to correspondence?"

"We'll get somebody. A young woman, who says she is well recommended, advertised in Thursday's papers, and I wrote her from Witch-Hollow to come around Sunday morning."

"That's to-morrow."

Quarren nodded.

So Dankmere trotted jauntily away into the night, and Quarren locked the gallery and went to bed, certain that he was destined to dream of Strelsa. But the sleek, narrow head and slightly protruding eyes of Langly Sprowl was the only vision that peered cautiously at him through his sleep.

The heated silence of a Sunday morning in June awoke him from a somewhat restless night. Bathed and shaved, he crept forth limply to breakfast at the Founders' Club where he still retained a membership. There was not a soul there excepting himself and the servants—scarcely a person on the avenues and cross-streets which he traversed going and coming, only one or two old men selling Sunday papers at street-stands, an old hag gleaning in the gutters, and the sparrows.

Clothing was a burden. He had some pongee garments which he put on, installed himself in the gallery with a Sunday paper, an iced lime julep, and a cigarette, and awaited the event of the young lady who had

"She came about noon—a pale youn

girl, very slim in her limp black gown."

advertised that she knew all about book-keeping, stenography, and typewriting, and could prove it.

She came about noon—a pale young girl, very slim in her limp black gown, and, at Quarren's invitation, seated herself at the newly purchased desk of the firm.

Here, at his request she took a page or two of dictation from him and typed it rapidly and accurately.

She had her own system of book-keeping which she explained to the young man who seemed to think it satisfactory. Then he asked her what salary she expected, and she told him, timidly.

"All right," he said with a smile, "if it suits you it certainly suits me. Will you begin to-morrow?"

"Whenever you wish, Mr. Quarren."

"Well, there won't be very much to do for a while," he said laughingly, "except to sit at that desk and look ornamental."

She flushed, then smiled and thanked him for giving her the position, adding with another blush that she would do her best.

"Your best," he said amiably, "will probably be exactly what we require. . . . Did you bring any letters?"

She hesitated: "One," she said gravely. She searched in her reticule, found it, and handed it to Quarren who read it in silence, then returned it to her.

"You were stenographer in Mr. Sprowl's private office?"

"Yes."

"This letter isn't signed by Mr. Sprowl."

"No, by Mr. Kyte, his private secretary."

"It seems you were there only six months."

"Six months."

"And before that where were you?"

"At home."

"Oh; Mr. Sprowl was your first employer!"

"Yes."

"Why did you leave?"

The girl hesitated so long that he thought she had not understood, and was about to repeat the question when something in her pallor and in her uplifted eyes checked him.

"I don't know why I was sent away," she said in a colourless voice.

He thought for a while, then, carelessly: "I take it that there was nothing irregular in *your* conduct?"

"No."

"You'd tell me if there was, wouldn't you?"

She lifted her dark eyes to his. "Yes," she said.

How much of an expert he was at judging faces he did not know, but he was perfectly satisfied with himself when she took her leave.

And when Dankmere came in after luncheon he said:

"I've engaged a book-keeper. Her name is Jessie Vining. She's evidently unhappy, poor, underfed, and the prettiest thing you ever saw out of a business college. So, being unhappy, poor, underfed *and* pretty, I take it that she's all to the good."

"It's a generous world of men," said Dankmere—"so I guess she *is* good."

"I'm sure of it. She was Sprowl's private stenographer—and he sent her away. . . . There are three reasons why he might have dismissed her. I've taken my choice of them."

"Did he give her a letter?"

"No."

"Oh. Then I've taken my choice, too."

"Kyte ventured to give her a letter," said Quarren. "I've heard that Kyte *could* be decent sometimes."

"I see."

Nothing further was said about the new book-keeper. His lordship went into the back parlour and played the piano until satiated; then mixed himself a lime julep.

That afternoon they went over the reports of the experts very carefully. From these reports and his own conclusions Quarren drafted a catalogue while Dankmere went about sticking adhesive labels on the frames, all numbered. And, as he trotted blithely about his work, he talked to himself and to the pictures:

"Here's number nine for you, old lady! If I'd had a face like that I'd have killed the artist who transferred it to canvas! . . . Number sixteen for you there in your armour! Somebody in Springfield will buy you for an ancestor and that's what will happen to you. . . . And you, too, in a bag-wig!—*you'll* be some rich Yankee's ancestor before you know it! That's the way you'll end, my smirking friend. . . . Hello! *Tiens! In Gottes namen*—whom have we here? Why, it's Venus! . . . And hot weather is no excuse for going about *that* way! . . . Listen to this, Quarren, for an impromptu patter-song—

"'Venus, dear, you ought to know
What the proper caper is—
Even Eve, who wasn't slow,
Robbed the neighbours' graperies!
Even Mænads on the go,
Fat Bacchantes in a row—
Even ladies in a show
Wear *some* threads of naperies!

Through the heavens planet-strewn
Where a shred of vapour is
Quickly clothes herself the Moon!
Get you to a modiste soon
Where the tissue-paper is,
Cut in fashions fit for June—
Wear 'em, dear, for draperies——' "

"*Good* heavens!" protested Quarren—"how long can you run on like that?"

"Years and years, my dear fellow. It's in me—born in me! Can you beat it? Though I appear to be a peer appearance is a liar; cast for a part apart from caste, departing I climb higher toward the boards to bore the hordes and lord it, sock and buskin dispensing sweetness, art, and light as per our old friend Ruskin——"

"Dankmere!"

"Heaven-born?"

"Stop!"

"I remain put. . . . What number do I stick on this gentleman with streaky features?"

"Eighteen. That's a Franz Hals."

"Really?"

"Yes; the records are all here, and the experts agree."

His lordship got down nimbly from the step-ladder and came over to the desk:

"Young sir," he said, "how much is that picture worth?"

"All we can get for it. It's not a very good example."

"Are you going to tell people that?"

"If they ask me," said Quarren, smiling.

"What price are you going to put on it?"

"Ten thousand."

"And do you think any art-smitten ass will pay that sum for a thing like that?"

"I think so. If it were only a decent example I'd ask ten times that—and probably get it in the end."

Dankmere inspected the picture more respectfully for a few moments, then pasted a label on an exquisite head by Greuze.

"She's a peach," he said. "What price is going to waft her from my roof-tree?"

"The experts say it's not a Greuze but a contemporary copy. And there's no pedigree, either."

"Oh," said the Earl blankly, "is that your opinion, too?"

"I haven't any yet. But there's no such picture by Greuze extant."

"You *don't* think it a copy?"

"I'm inclined not to. Under that thick blackish-yellow varnish I believe I'll find the pearl and rose texture of old Greuze himself. In the meantime it's not for sale."

"I see. And this battle-scene?"

"Wouverman's—ruined by restoring. It's not worth much."

"And this Virgin?"

"Pure as the Virgin Herself—not a mark—flawless. It's by 'The Master of the Death of Mary.' Isn't it a beauty? Do you notice St. John holding the three cherries and the Christ-child caressing the goldfinch? Did you ever see such colour?"

"It's—er—pretty," said his lordship.

And so during the entire afternoon they compiled the price-list and catalogue, marking copies for what they were, noting such pictures as had been ruined by restoring or repainted so completely as to almost obliterate the last original brush stroke. Also Quarren reserved for his own investigations such canvases as he doubted or of which he had hopes—a number that under their crocked, battered, darkened or discoloured surfaces hinted of by-gone glories that might still be living and only imprisoned beneath the thick opacity of dust, soot, varnish, and the repainting of many years ago.

And that night he went to bed happier than he had ever been in all his life—unless his moments with Strelsa Leeds might be termed happy ones.

Monday morning brought, among other things, a cloudless sun, and little Miss Vining quite as spotless and radiant; and within ten minutes the click of the typewriter made the silent picture-plastered rooms almost gay.

In shirtwaist and cuffs she took her place behind the desk with a sort of silent decision which seemed at once to invest her with suzerainty over all that corner of the room; and Dankmere coming in a little later, whistling merrily and twirling his walking-stick, sheered off instinctively on his breezy progress through the rooms, skirting Jessie Vining's domain as though her private ensign flew above it and earthworks, cannon and trespass notices flanked her corner on every side.

In the back parlour he said to Quarren: "So that is the girl?"

"It sure is."

"God bless my soul! she acts as though she had just bought in the whole place."

"What's she doing?"

"Just sitting there," admitted Dankmere.

He seemed to have lost his spirits. Once, certain that he was unobserved except by Quarren, he ventured to balance his stick on his chin, but it was a half-hearted performance; and when he tossed up his straw hat and attempted to catch it on his head, he missed, and the corrugated brim sustained a dent.

A number of people called that morning, quiet, well-dressed, cautious-eyed, soft-spoken gentlemen who moved about noiselessly over the carpets and, on encountering one another, nodded with silent familiarity and smiles scarcely perceptible.

They seemed to require no information concerning the pictures which they swept with glances almost careless on their first rounds of the rooms. But the first leisurely tour always resulted in a second where one or two pictures seemed to claim their closer scrutiny.

Now and then one of these gentlemen would screw a jeweller's glass into his eye and remain a few minutes nose almost touching a canvas. Several used the large reading-glass lying on a side table. Before they departed all glanced over the incomplete scale of prices which Jessie Vining had typed and bound in blue covers; but one and all took their leave in amiable silence, saying a non-committal word or two to Quarren in pleasantly modulated voices and passing Jessie's desk with a grave inclination of gravely preoccupied faces.

When the last leisurely lingerer had taken his leave Quarren said to Jessie Vining:

"Those are representatives of various first-class

dealers—confidential buyers, sons—even dealers themselves — like that handsome gray-haired young-looking man who is Max Von Ebers, head of that great house."

"But they didn't buy one single thing!" said Jessie.

Quarren laughed: "People don't buy off-hand. Our triumph is to get them here at all. I wrote to each of them personally."

Nobody else came for a long while; then one or two of the lesser dealers appeared, and now and then a man who might be an agent or a prowling and wealthy amateur or perhaps one of those curious haunters of all art marts who never buy but who never miss assisting at all inaugurations in person—like an ubiquitous and silent dog who turns up wherever more than two people assemble with any purpose in view—or without any.

During the forenoon and early afternoon several women came into the galleries; and they seemed to be a little different from ordinary women, although it would be hard to say wherein they were different except in one instance—a tall, darkly handsome girl whose jewellery was as conspicuously oriental as her brilliant colour.

Later Quarren told Jessie Vining that they were expert buyers on commission or brokers having clients among those very wealthy people who bought pictures now and then because it was fashionable to do so. Also, these same women-brokers represented a number of those unhappy old families who, incognito, were being forced by straitened circumstances to part secretly with heirlooms—family plate, portraits, miniatures, furniture—even with the antique mirrors on the walls

and the very fire-dogs on the hearth amid the ashes of a burnt-out race almost extinct.

A few Jews came—representing the extreme types of the most wonderful race of people in the world—one tall, handsome, immaculate young man whose cultivated accent, charming manners, and quiet bearing challenged exception—and one or two representing the other extreme, loud, restless, aggressive, and as impertinent as they dared be, discussing the canvases in noisy voices and with callous manners verging always on the offensive.

These evinced a disposition for cash deals and bargain-wrangling, discouraged good-naturedly by Quarren who referred them to the catalogue; and presently they took themselves off.

Dankmere sidled up to Quarren rather timidly toward the close of the afternoon.

"I don't see what bally good *I* am in this business," he said. "I don't mean to shirk, Quarren, but there doesn't seem to be anything for me to do. I think that all these beggars spot me for an ignoramus the moment they lay eyes on me, and the whole thing falls on you."

Quarren said laughingly: "Well, didn't you furnish the stock?"

"We ought to go halves," muttered Dankmere, shyly skirting Jessie Vining's domain where she was writing letters with the Social Register at her elbow.

The last days of June and the first of July were repetitions in a measure of the opening day at the Dankmere Galleries; people came and were received and entertained by Quarren; Dankmere sat about in various chairs or retired furtively to the backyard to

smoke at intervals; Jessie Vining with more colour in her pale, oval face, ruled her corner of the room in a sort of sweet and silent dignity.

Dankmere, who, innately, possessed the effrontery of a born comedian, for some reason utterly unknown to himself, was inclined to be afraid of her—afraid of the clear brown eyes indifferently lifted to his when he entered—afraid of the quiet "Good-morning, Lord Dankmere," with which she responded to his morning greeting—afraid of her cool skilful little hands busy with pencil, pen, or lettered key—afraid of everything about her from her rippling brown hair and snowy collar to the tips of her little tan shoes—even afraid of the back of her head when it presented only a slender neck and two little rosy, close-set ears. But he didn't mention his state of abasement to Quarren.

A curious thing occurred, too: Jessie had evidently been gay on Sunday; and, Monday noon, while out for lunch, she had left on her desk two Coney Island postal cards decorated with her own photograph. When she returned, one card had vanished; and she searched quietly but thoroughly before she left for home that evening, but she did not find the card. But she said nothing about it.

The dreadful part of the affair was that it was theft —the Earl of Dankmere's first crime.

Why he had taken it he did not know. The awful impulse of kleptomania alone seemed to explain but scarcely palliate his first offence against society.

It was only after he realised that the picture and Jessie Vining vaguely resembled his dead Countess that his lordship began to understand why he had committed a felony before he actually knew what he was doing.

Jessie Vining.

And one day when Quarren was still out for lunch and Jessie had returned to her correspondence, the terrified Earl suddenly appeared before her holding out the photograph: and she took it, astonished, her lifted eyes mutely inquiring concerning the inwardness of this extraordinary episode.

But Dankmere merely fled to the backyard and remained there all the afternoon smoking his head off; and it was several days before Jessie had an opportunity to find herself alone in his vicinity and to ask him with almost perfect self-possession where he had found the photograph.

"I stole it," said Dankmere, turning bright red to his ear-tips.

"All she could think of to say was: "Why?"

"It resembles my wife. So do you."

"Really," she said coldly.

Several days later she learned by the skilfully careless questioning of Quarren that the Countess of Dankmere had not existed on earth for the last ten years.

This news extenuated the Earl's guilt in her eyes to a degree which permitted a slight emotion resembling pity to pervade her. And one day she said to him, casually pleasant—"Would you care for that post-card, Lord Dankmere? If it resembles your wife I would be very glad to return it to you."

Dankmere, painfully red again, thanked her so nicely that the slight, instinctive distrust and aversion which, in the beginning, she had entertained for his lordship, suddenly disappeared so entirely that it surprised her when she had leisure to think it over afterward.

So she gave him the post-card, and next day she

found a rose in a glass of water on her desk; and that ended the incident for them both except that Dankmere was shyer of her than ever and she was beginning to realise that his aloof and expressionless deportment was due to shyness—which seemed to be inexplicable because otherwise timidity was scarcely the word to characterise his lively little lordship.

Once, looking out of the rear windows, through the lace curtains she saw the Earl of Dankmere in the back-yard, gravely turning handsprings on the grass while still smoking his pipe. Once, entering the gallery unexpectedly, she discovered the Earl standing at the piano, playing a rattling breakdown while his nimble little feet performed the same with miraculous agility and professional precision. She withdrew to the front door, hastily, and waited until the piano ceased from rumbling and the Oxfords were at rest, then returned with heightened colour and a stifled desire to laugh which she disguised under an absent-minded nod of greeting.

Meanwhile one or two pictures had been sold to dealers—not important ones—but the sales were significant enough to justify the leasing of the basement. And here Quarren installed himself from morning to noon as apprentice to an old Englishman who, before the failure of his eyesight, had amassed a little fortune as surgeon, physician, and trained nurse to old and decrepit pictures.

Not entirely unequipped in the beginning, Quarren now learned more about his trade—the guarded secrets of mediums and solvents, the composition of ancient and modern canvases, how old and modern colours were ground and prepared, how mixed, how applied.

He learned how the old masters of the various schools of painting prepared a canvas or panel—how the snowy "veil" was spread and dried, how the under painting was executed in earth-red and bone-black, how the glaze was used and why, what was the medium, what the varnish.

He learned about the "baths of sunlight," too—those clarifying immersions practised so openly yet until recently not understood. He comprehended the mechanics, physics, and simple chemistry of that splendid, mysterious "inward glow" which seemed to slumber under the colours of the old masters like the exquisite warmth in the heart of a gem.

To him, little by little, was revealed the only real wonder of the old masters—their astonishing honesty. He began to understand that, first of all, they were self-respecting artisans, practising their trade of making pictures and painting each picture as well as they knew how; that, like other artisans, their pride was in knowing their trade, in a mastery of their tools, and in executing commissions as honestly as they knew how and leaving the "art" to take care of itself.

Also he learned—for he was obliged to learn in self-protection—the tricks and deceptions and forgeries of the trade—all that was unworthy about it, all its shabby disguises and imitations and crude artifices and cunning falsehoods.

He examined old canvases painted over with old-new pictures and then relined; canvases showing portions of original colour; old canvases and panels repainted and artificially darkened and cleverly covered with both paint and varnish cracks; canvases that almost defied detection by needle-point or glass or thumb fric-

tion or solvent, so ingenious was the forgery simulating age.

Every known adjunct was provided to carry out deception—genuinely old canvases or panels, old stretchers really worm-eaten, aged frames of the period, half-obliterated seals bearing sometimes even the cross-keys of the Vatican. Even, in some cases, pretence that the pictures had been cut from the frame and presumably stolen was carried out by a knife-slashed and irregular ridge where the canvas had actually been so cut and then sewed to a modern *toile.*

For forgery of art is as old as the Greeks and as new as to-day—the one sinister art that perhaps will never become a lost art; and Quarren and his aged mentor in the basement of the Dankmere Galleries discovered more than enough frauds among the Dankmere family pictures showing how the little Earl's forebears had once been gulled before his present lordship lay in his cradle.

To Quarren the work was fascinating and, except for his increasing worry over Strelsa Leeds, would have been all-absorbing to the degree of happiness—or that interested contentment which passes for it on earth.

To see the dull encasing armour of varnish disappear from some ancient masterpiece under the thumb, as the delicate thumb of the Orient polishes lacquer; to dare a solvent when needed, timing its strength to the second lest disaster tarnish forever the exquisite bloom of the shrouded glazing; to cautiously explore for suspected signatures, to brood and ponder over ancient records and alleged pedigrees; to compare prints and mezzotints, photographs and engravings in search for identities; to study threads of canvas, flakes of varnish,

flinty globules of paint under the microscope; to learn, little by little, the technical manners and capricious mannerisms significant of the progress periods of each dead master; to pore over endless volumes, monographs, illustrated foreign catalogues of public and private collections—in these things and through them happiness came to Quarren.

Never a summer sun rose over the streets of Ascalon arousing the Philistine to another day of toil but it awoke Quarren to the subdued excitement of another day. Eager, interested, content in his self-respect, he went forth to a daily business which he cared about for its own sake, and was fast learning to care about to the point of infatuation.

He was never tired these days; but the summer heat and lack of air and exercise made him rather thin and pale. Close work with the magnifying glass had left his features slightly careworn, and had begun little converging lines at the outer corners of his eyes. Only one line in his face expressed anything less happy—the commencement of a short perpendicular crease between his eyebrows. Anxious pondering over old canvases was not deepening that faint signature of perplexity—or the forerunner of Care's signs manual nervously etched from the wing of either nostril.

CHAPTER XII

Since Quarren had left Witch-Hollow, he and Strelsa had exchanged half-a-dozen letters of all sorts —gay, impersonal notes, sober epistles reflecting more subdued moods, then letters fairly sparkling with high spirits and the happy optimism of young people discovering that there is more of good than evil in a world still really almost new to them. Then there was a long letter of description and amusing narrative from her, in which, here and there, she became almost sentimental over phases of rural beauty; and he replied at equal length telling her about his new shop-work in detail.

Suddenly out of a clear sky, there came from her a short, dry, and deliberate letter mentioning once more her critical worldly circumstances and the necessity of confronting them promptly and with intelligence and decision.

To which he answered vigorously, begging her to hold out—either fit herself for employment—or throw her fortunes in with his and take the chances.

"Rix dear," she answered, "don't you suppose I have thought of that? But I can't do it. There is nothing left in me to go on with. I'm burnt out—deadly tired, wanting nothing more than I shall have by marrying as I must marry. For I shall have you, too, as I have always had you. You said so, didn't you?

"What difference, then, does it make to you or me whether or not I am married?

"If you were sufficiently equipped to take care of me, and if I married you, I could not give you anything more than I have given already—I would not wish to if I could. All that many other women consider part of love—all that lesser side of it and of marriage I could not give to you or to any man—could not endure; because it is not in me and never has been. It is foreign to me, unpleasant, distasteful—even hateful.

"So as I can give you nothing more than I have given or ever shall give, and as you have given me all you can—anyway all I care for in you—let me feel free to seek my worldly salvation and find the quiet and rest and surcease from anxiety which comes only under such circumstances.

"You won't think unkindly of me, will you, Rix? I don't know very much; I amount to very little. What ideals I had are dead. Why should anybody bother to agree or disagree with my very unaggressive opinions or criticise harshly a life which has been spent mainly in troubling the world as little as possible?

"There are a number of people here—among them several friends of Jim Wycherly, all of them aviation-mad. Jim took out the Stinger, smashed the planes and got a fall which was not very serious. Lester Caldera did the same thing to the Kent biplane except that he fell into the river and Sir Charles and Chrysos, in the launch, fished him out—swearing, they say.

"Vincent Wier made a fine flight in his Delatour Dragon, sailing 'round and 'round like a big hawk for a quarter of an hour, but the wind came up and he

couldn't land, and he finally came down thirty miles north of us in a swamp.

"Langly took me for a short flight in his Owlet No. 3—only two miles and not very high, but the sensation was simply horrid. I never even cared for motoring, you see, so the experience left me most unenthusiastic, greatly to Langly's disgust. Really, all I care for is a decently gaited horse—and I prefer to walk him half the time. There is nothing speedy about me, Rix. If I ever had the inclination it's gone now.

"To the evident displeasure of Sir Charles, Langly took up Chrysos Lacy; and the child adored it. I believe Sir Charles said something cutting to Langly in his quiet and dry way which has, apparently, infuriated my to-be-affianced, for he never goes near Sir Charles, now, and that cold-eyed gentleman completely ignores him. Which is *not* very agreeable for me.

"Oh, Rix, there seems to be so many misunderstandings in this exceedingly small world of ours—rows innumerable, heartburns, recriminations, quarrels secret and open, and endless misunderstandings.

"Please don't let any come between us, will you? Somehow, lately, I find myself looking on you as a distant but solid and almost peaceful refuge for my harried thoughts. And I'm so very, very tired of being hunted.

"STRELSA."

"If they hunt you too hard," he wrote to Strelsa, "the gateway of my friendship is open to you always: remember that, now and in the days to come.

"What you have written leaves me with nothing to answer except this. To all it is given to endure according to their strength; beyond it no one can

strive; but short of its limits it's a shame to show faint-heartedness.

"About the man you are determined to marry I have no further word to say. You know in what repute he is held in your world, and you believe that its censure is unjust. There is good in every man, perhaps, and perhaps the good in this man may show itself only in response to the better qualities in you.

"Somehow, without trying, you almost instantly evoke the better qualities in me. You changed my entire life; do you know it? I myself scarcely comprehended why. Perhaps the negative sweetness in you concentrated and brought out the positive strength so long dormant in me. All I know clearly is that you came into my life and found a fool wasting it, capering about in a costume half livery, half motley. My ambition was limited to my cap and bells; my aspirations never reached beyond the tip of my bauble. Then I saw you—and, all by themselves, my rags of motley fell from me, and something resembling a man stepped clear of them.

"I am trying to make out of myself all that there is in me to develop. It is not much—scarcely more than the ability to earn a living.

"I have come to care for nothing more than the right to look this sunny world straight in the face. Until I knew you I had scarcely seen it except through artificial light—scarce heard its voice; for the laughter of your world and the jingle of my cap and bells drowned it in my ass's ears.

"I could tell you—for in dark moments I often believe it—that there is only one thing that counts in the world—one thing worth having, worth giving—love!

"But in my heart I know it is not so; and the romancers are mistaken; and so is the heart denied.

"Better and worth more than love of man or woman is the mind's silent approval—whether given in tranquillity or accorded in dumb anguish.

"Strelsa dear, I shall always care for you; but I have discovered that love is another matter—higher or lower as you will—but different. And I do not think I shall be able to love the girl who does what you are decided to do. And that does not mean that I criticise you or blame you, or that my sympathy, affection, interest, in you will be less. On the contrary all these emotions may become keener; only one little part will die out, and that without changing the rest—merely that mysterious, curious, elusive and illogical atom in the unstable molecule, which we call love—and which, when separated, leaves the molecule changed only in name. We call it friendship, then.

"And this is, I think, what you would most desire. So when you do what you have determined to do, I will really become toward you what you are—and have always been—toward me. And could either of us ask for more?

"Only—forgive me—I wish it had been Sir Charles—or almost any other man. But that is for your decision. Strelsa governs and alone is responsible to Strelsa.

"Meanwhile do not doubt my affection—do not fear unkindness, judgment, or criticism. I wish I were what you cared for most in the world—after the approval of your own mind. I wish you cared for me not only as you do but with all that has never been aroused in you. For without that I am helpless to fight for you.

"So, in your own way, you will live life through, knowing that in me you will always have an unchanged friend—even though the lover died when you became a wife. Is all clear between us now?

"If you are ever in town, or passing through to Newport or Bar Harbour, stop and inspect our gallery.

"It is really quite pretty and some of the pictures are excellent. You should see it now—sunlight slanting in through the dusty bay-window, Dankmere at a long polished table doing his level best to assemble certain old prints out of a portfolio containing nearly a thousand; pretty little Miss Vining, pencil in hand, checking off at her desk the reference books we require in our eternal hunt for information; I below stairs in overalls if you please, paint and varnish stained, a jeweller's glass screwed into my left eye, examining an ancient panel which I strongly hope may have been the work of a gentleman named Bronzino—for its mate is almost certainly the man in armour in the Metropolitan Museum.

"Strelsa, it is the most exciting business I ever dreamed of. And the beauty of it is that it leads out into everything—stretches a thousand sensitive tentacles which grasp at knowledge of beauty everywhere—whether it lie in the sombre splendour of the tapestries of Bayeux, of Italy, of Flanders; or deep in the woven magnificence of some dead Sultan's palace rug; or in the beauty of the work of silversmiths, goldsmiths, of sculptors in ivory or in wood long dead; or in the untinted marbles of the immortal masters.

"Never before did I understand how indissolubly all arts are linked, how closely and eternally knit to-

gether in the vast fabric fashioned by man from the beginning of time, and in the cryptograms of which lie buried all that man has ever thought and hoped.

"My cat, Daisy, recently presented the Dankmere Galleries with five squeaking kittens of assorted colour and design. Their eyes are now open.

"Poor Daisy! It seems only yesterday when, calmly purring on my knee, she heard for the first time in her innocent life a gentleman cat begin an intermezzo on the back fence.

"Never before had Daisy heard such amazing language: she rose, astounded, listening; then, giving me one wild glance, fled under the piano. I shied an empty bottle at the moon-lit minstrel; and I supposed that Daisy approved. But man supposes and cat proposes and—Daisy's kittens are certainly ornamental. Dankmere carries one in each pocket, Daisy trotting at his heels with an occasional little exclamation of solicitude and pride.

"Really we're a funny lot here in the Dankmere Galleries—not superficially business-like perhaps, for we close at five and have tea in the extension, Dankmere, Miss Vining, I, Daisy, and her young ones—Daisy and the latter taking their nourishment together in a basket which Miss Vining has lined with blue silk.

"In the evenings sometimes Miss Vining remains and dines with Dankmere and myself at some near restaurant; and after dinner Karl Westguard comes in and reads the most recent chapter of his novel—or perhaps Dankmere plays and sings old-time songs for us—or, if the heat makes us feel particularly futile, I perform some of those highly intellectual tricks which once made

"'In the evenings sometimes Miss Vining remains and dines

with Dankmere and myself at some near restaurant.'"

me acceptable among people I now seldom or never see.

"Miss Vining, as I have already told you in other letters, is a sweet, sincere girl with no pretence to anything out of the ordinary yet blessed with a delicate sense of honour and incidentally of humour.

"She is quite alone in the world, and, now that she has made up her mind about Dankmere and me I can see that she shyly enjoys our including her in our harmless informalities.

"Westguard is immensely interested in her as a 'type,' and he informs me that he is 'studying' her. Which is more or less bosh; but Karl loves to take himself seriously.

"Nobody you know has been to see us. It may be because your world is out of town, but I'm beginning to believe that the Dankmere Galleries need expect no patronage from that same world. Friendship usually fights shy of the frontiers of business. Old acquaintanceship is forgot very quickly when one side or the other has anything to sell. Only those thrifty imitations of friends venture near in quest of special privilege; and not getting it, go, never to return. *Ubi amici, ibi opes!*

"When you pass through this furnace of Ascalon called New York will you stop among the Philistines long enough to take a cup of tea with us?—I'll show you the pictures; Dankmere will play 'Shannon Water' for you; Miss Vining will talk pretty platitudes to you, Daisy will purr for you, and the painted eyes of Dankmere's ancestors will look down approvingly at you from the wall; and all our little world will know that the loveliest and best of all the greater world is break-

ing bread with us under our roof, and that one for once, unlike man's dealings with your celestial sisters, our entertainment of you will not be wholly unawares.

"R. S. QUARREN."

The basement workshop was aromatic with the odours of solvents, mediums, and varnishes when he returned from posting his letter to Strelsa. His old English mentor had departed for good, leaving him to go forward alone in his profession.

And now, as he stood there, looking out into the sunny backyard, for the first time he felt the silence and isolation of the place, and his own loneliness. Doubt crept in whispering the uselessness of working, of saving, of self-denial, of laying by anything for a future that already meant nothing of happiness to him.

For whom, after all, should he save, hoard, gather together, economise? Who was there to labour for? For whom should he endure?

He cared nothing for women; he had really never cared for any woman excepting only this one. He would never marry and have a son. He had no near or distant relatives. For whose sake, then, was he standing here in workman's overalls? What business had he here in the basement of a shabby house in midsummer? Did there remain any vague hope of Strelsa? Perhaps. Hope is the last of one's friends to die. Or was it for himself that he was working now to provide against those evil days "when the keepers of the house shall tremble"? Perhaps he was unconsciously obeying nature's first law.

And yet, slowly within him grew a certainty that these reasons were not the real ones—not the vital im-

pulse that moved his hand steadily through critical and delicate moments as he bent, breathless, over the faded splendours of ancient canvases. No; somehow or other he had already begun to work for the sake of the work itself—whatever that really meant. That was the basic impulse—the occult motive; and, somehow he knew that, once aroused, the desire to strive could never again in him remain wholly quiescent.

Both Dankmere and Miss Vining had gone to lunch, presumably in different directions; Daisy and her youngsters, having been nourished, were asleep; there was not a sound in the house except the soft rubbing of tissue-paper where Quarren was lightly removing the retouching varnish from a relined canvas. Presently the front door-bell rang.

Quarren rinsed his hands and, still wearing overalls and painter's blouse, mounted the basement stairs and opened the front door. And Mrs. Sprowl supported by a footman waddled in, panting.

"Tell your master I want to see him," she said—"I don't mean that fool of an Englishman; I mean Mr. Quar— Good Lord! Ricky, is that *you?* Here, get me a chair—those front steps nearly killed me. Long ago I swore I'd never enter a house which was not basement-built and had an elevator! . . . Hand me one of those fans. And if there's any water in the house not swarming with typhoid germs, get me a glass of it."

He brought her a tumbler of spring water; she panted and gulped and fanned and panted, her little green eyes roaming around her.

Presently she dismissed the footman, and turned her heavily flushed face on Quarren. The rolls of fat

crowded the lace on her neck, perspiration glistened under her sparklike eyes.

"How are you?" she inquired.

He said, smilingly, that he was well.

"You don't look it. You look gaunt. . . . Well, I never thought you'd come to this—that you had it in you to do anything useful."

"I believe I've heard you say so now and then," he said with perfect good-humour.

"Why not? Why should I have thought that your talents amounted to more than ornaments?"

"No reason to suppose so," he admitted, amused.

"Not the slightest. Talent usually damns people to an effortless existence. And yours was a pleasant one, too. You had a good time, didn't you?"

"Oh, very."

"There was nothing to do except to come in, kiss the girls all around, and make faces to amuse them, was there?"

"Not much more," he admitted, laughing.

Mrs. Sprowl's little green eyes travelled all over the walls.

"Umph," she snorted, "I suppose these are some of Dankmere's heirlooms. I never fancied that little bounder——"

"Wait!"

"What!"

"Wait a moment. I like Dankmere, and he isn't a bounder——"

"He *is* one!"

"Keep that opinion to yourself," he said bluntly.

The old lady's eyes blazed. "I'm damned if I do!" she retorted—"I'll say what——"

"Not here! You mustn't be uncivil here. You know well enough how to behave when necessary; and if you don't do it I'll call your carriage."

For fully five minutes Mrs. Sprowl sat there attempting to digest what he had said. The process was awful to behold, but she accomplished it at last with a violent effort.

"Ricky," she said, "I didn't come here to quarrel with you over an Englishman who—of whom I—have my personal opinion."

He laughed, leaned over and deliberately patted her fat wrist; and she glared at him somewhat as a tigress inspects a favourite but overgrown and presuming cub.

"I don't know why you came," he said, "but it was nice of you anyway and I am glad to see you."

"If that's true," she said, "you're one of mighty few. The joy which people feel in my presence is usually exhibited when I'm safely out of their houses, or they are out of mine."

She laughed at that; and he did too; and she gulped her glass of water empty and refused more.

"Ricky," she began abruptly, "you've been up to that Witch-Hollow place of Molly's?"

"Yes."

"Well, what the devil is going on there?"

"Aviation," he said blandly.

"What else? Don't evade an answer! I can't get anything out of that little idiot, Molly; I can't worm anything out of Sir Charles; I can't learn anything from Strelsa Leeds; and as for Langly he won't even answer my letters.

"Now I want to know what is going on there? I've been as short with Strelsa as I dare be—she's got to be

led with sugar. I've almost ordered her to come to me at Newport—but she doesn't come."

"She's resting," said Quarren coolly.

"Hasn't she had time to rest in that dingy, dead-and-alive place? And what keeps Langly there? He has nothing to look at except a few brood-mares. Do you suppose he has the bad taste to hang around waiting for Chester Ledwith to get out and Mary Ledwith to return? Or is it something else that glues him there—with the *Yulan* in the North River?"

Quarren shrugged his lack of interest in the subject.

"If I thought," muttered the old lady—"if I imagined for one moment that Langly was daring to try any of his low, cold-blooded tricks on Strelsa Leeds, I'd go up there myself—I'd take the next train and tell that girl plainly what kind of a citizen my charming nephew really is!"

Quarren was silent.

"Why the dickens don't you say something?" she demanded. "I want to know whether I ought to go up there or not. Have you ever observed—have you ever suspected that there might be anything between Langly and Strelsa Leeds?—any tacit understanding—any interest on her part in him? . . . Why don't you answer me?"

"You know," he said, "that it's none of your business what I believe."

"Am I to take that impudence literally?"

"Exactly as I said it. You asked improper questions; I am obliged to remind you that you cannot expect me to answer them."

"Why can't you speak of Langly?"

"Because what concerns him does not concern me."

"I thought you were in love with Strelsa," she said bluntly.

"If I were, do you imagine I'd discuss it with you?"

"I'll tell you what!" she shouted, purple with rage, "you might do a damn sight worse! I'd—I'd rather see her your wife than his!—and God knows *what* he wants of her at that—as Mary Ledwith has first call or the world will turn Langly out of doors!"

Quarren, slightly paler, looked at her in silence.

"I tell you the world will spit in his face," she said between her teeth, "if he doesn't make good with Mary Ledwith after what he's done to her and her husband."

"He has too much money," said Quarren. "Besides there's an ordinance against it."

"You watch and see! Some things are *too* rotten to be endured——"

"What? I haven't noticed any either abroad or here. Anyway it doesn't concern me."

"Don't you care for that girl?"

"We are friends."

"Friends, eh!" she mimicked him wickedly, plying her fan like a madwoman; "well I fancy I know what sort of friendship has made you look ten years older in half a year. Oh, Ricky, Ricky!"—she added with an abrupt change of feeling—"I'm sorry for you. I like you even when you are impertinent to me—and you know I do! But I—my heart is set on her marrying Sir Charles. You know it is. Could anything on earth be more suitable?—happier for her as well as for him? Isn't he a man where Langly is a—a toad, a cold-blooded worm!—a—a thing!

"I tell you my heart's set on it; there is nothing else

interests me; I think of nothing else, care for nothing else——"

"Why?"

"What?" she said, suddenly on her guard.

"Why do you care for it so much?"

"Why? That is an absurd question."

"Then answer it without taking time to search for any reason except the real one."

"Ricky, you insolent——"

"Never mind. Answer me; *why* are you so absorbed in this marriage?"

She said with a calmly contemptuous shrug: "Because Sir Charles is deeply in love with her, and I am fond of them both."

"Is that sufficient reason for such strenuous and persistent efforts on your part?"

"That—and hatred for Langly," she said stolidly.

"Just those three reasons?"

"Certainly. Just those three."

He shook his head.

"Do you disbelieve me?" she demanded.

"I am compelled to—knowing that never in all your life have you made the slightest effort in behalf of friendship—never inconvenienced yourself in the least for the sake of anybody on earth."

She stared at him, amazed, then angry, then burst into a loud laugh; but, even while laughing her fat features suddenly altered as though pain had cut mirth short.

"What is the matter?" he said.

"Nothing. . . . *You* are the matter. . . . I've always been fool enough to take you for a fool. You were the only one among us clever enough to read us

and remain unread. God! If only some of us could see what we look like in the archives of your brain! . . . Let it go at that; I don't care what I look like as long as it's a friendly hand that draws my features. . . . I'm an old woman, remember. . . . And it *is* a friendly pencil you wield, isn't it, Ricky?"

"Yes."

"I believe it. I never knew you to do or say a deliberately unkind thing. I never knew you to abuse a confidence, either. . . . And you were the receptacle for many—Heaven only knows how many trivial, petty, miserable little intrigues you were made aware of, or how many secret kindnesses you have done. . . . Let that go, too. I want to tell you something."

She motioned him nearer; she was too stout to lean far forward: and he placed his chair beside hers.

"Do you know where and when Sir Charles first saw Strelsa Leeds?"

"Yes."

"In Egypt. She was the wife of the charming and accomplished Reggie at the time."

"I know."

"Did you know that Sir Charles fell in love with her then? That he never forgot her? That when Reggie finally took his last header into the ditch he had been riding for, Sir Charles came to me in America and asked what was best to do? That on my advice he waited until I managed to draw the girl out of her retirement? That then, on my advice, he returned to America to offer himself when the proper time arrived? Did you know these things, Rix?"

"No," he said.

"Then you know them now."

"Yes, I—" he hesitated, looking straight at her in silence. And after a while a slight colour not due to the heat deepened the florid hue of her features.

"I knew Sir Charles's father," she said in a voice so modulated—a voice so unexpected and almost pretty, that he could scarcely believe it was she who had spoken.

"You said," she went on under her breath, "that in all my life friendship has never inspired in me a kindly action. You are wrong, Rix. In the matter of this marriage my only inspiration is friendship—the friendship I had for a man who is dead. . . . Sir Charles is his only son."

Quarren looked at her in silence.

"I was young once, Ricky. I suppose you can scarcely believe that. Life and youth began early for me—and lasted a little more than a year—and then they both burnt out in my heart—leaving the rest of me alive—this dross!—" She touched herself on her bosom, then lowered her eyes, and sat thinking for a while.

Daisy walked into the room and seated herself in a bar of sunlight, pleasantly blinking her yellow eyes. Mrs. Sprôwl glanced at her absently, and they eyed each other in silence.

Then the larger of the pair drew a thick, uneasy breath, looked up at Quarren, all the cunning and hardness gone from her heavy features.

"I've only been trying to do for a dead man's son what might have pleased that man were he alive," she said. "Sir Charles was a little lad when he died. But he left a letter for him to read when he was grown up. I never saw the letter, but Sir Charles has told me that,

in it, his father spoke—amiably—of me and said that in me his son would always find a friend. . . . That is all, Rix. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Then—should I go to Witch-Hollow?"

"I can't answer you."

"Why?"

"Because—because I care for her too much. And I can do absolutely nothing for her. I could not swerve her or direct her. She alone knows what is in her heart and mind to do. I cannot alter it. She will act according to her strength; none can do otherwise. . . . And she is tired to the very soul. . . . You tell me that life and youth in you died within a year's space. I believe it. . . . But with her it took two years to die. And then it died. . . . Let her alone, in God's name! The child is weary of pursuit, deathly weary of importunity—tired, sad, frightened at the disaster to her fortune. Let her alone. If she marries it will be because of physical strength lacking—strength of character, of mind—perhaps moral, perhaps spiritual strength—I don't know. All I know is that no man or woman can help her, because the world has bruised her too long and she's afraid of it."

For a long while Mrs. Sprowl sat there in silence; then:

"It is strange," she mused, "that Strelsa should be afraid of Sir Charles."

"I don't think she is."

"Then why on earth won't she marry him? He is richer than Langly!"

Quarren looked at her oddly:

"But Sir Charles is her friend, you see. And so

am I. . . . Friends do not make a convenience of one another."

"She could learn to love him. He is a lovable fellow."

"I think," said Quarren, "that she has given to him and to me all that there is in her to give to any man. And so, perhaps, she could not make the convenience of a husband out of either of us."

"What a twisted, ridiculous, morbid——"

"Let her alone," he said gently.

"Very well. . . . But I'll be hanged if I let Langly alone! He's still got me to deal with, thank God!—whatever he dares do to Mary Ledwith—whatever he has done to that wretched creature Chester Ledwith—he's still got a perfectly vigorous aunt to reckon with. And we'll see," she added—"we'll see what can be done——"

The front door opened noisily.

"That's Dankmere," he said. "If you are not going to be civil to him hadn't you better go?"

"I'll be civil to him," she snorted, "but I'm going anyway. Good-bye, Ricky. I'll buy a picture of you when the weather's cooler. . . . How-de-do!"—as his lordship entered looking rather hot and mussy—"Hope your venture into the realms of art will prove successful, Lord Dankmere. Really, Rix, I must be going—if you'll call my man——"

"I'll take you down," he said, smilingly offering his support.

So Mrs. Sprowl rolled away in her motor, and Quarren came back, wearied with the perplexities and strain of life, to face once more the lesser problems of the immediate present: one of them was an ancient panel in the

basement, and he went downstairs to solve it, leaving Dankmere sorting out old prints and Jessie Vining, who had just returned, writing business letters on her machine.

There were not many business letters to write—one to the Metropolitan Museum people declining to present them with a charming little picture by Netscher which they wanted but did not wish to pay for; one to the Worcester Museum advising that progressive institution that, at the request of their director, four canvases had been shipped to them for inspection; several letters enclosing photographs of pictures desired by foreign experts; and a notification to one or two local millionaires that the Dankmere Galleries never shaded prices or exchanged canvases.

Having accomplished the last f the day's work remaining up to that particular minute, Jessie Vining leaned back in her chair, rubbed her pretty eyes, glanced partly around toward Lord Dankmere but checked herself, and, with her lips the slightest shade pursed up into a hint of primness, picked up the library novel which she had been reading during intervals of leisure.

It was mainly about a British Peer. The Peer did not resemble Dankmere in any particular; she had already noticed that. And now, as she read on, and, naturally enough, compared the ideal peer with the real one, the difference became painfully plain to her.

Could that short young man in rather mussy summer clothes, sorting prints over there, be a peer of the British realm? Was this young man, whom she had seen turning handsprings on the grass in the backyard, a belted Earl?

In spite of herself her short upper lip curled slightly

as she turned from her book to glance at him. He looked up at the same moment, and smiled on meeting her eye—such a kindly yet diffident smile that she blushed a trifle.

"I say, Miss Vining, I've gone over all these prints and I can't find one that resembles the Hogarth portrait—if it is a Hogarth."

"Mr. Quarren thinks it is."

"I daresay he's quite right, but there's nothing here to prove it"; and he slapped the huge portfolio shut, laid his hands on the table, vaulted to the top of it, and sat down. Miss Vining resumed her reading.

"Miss Vining?"

"Yes?" very leisurely.

"How old do you think I am?"

"I beg your pardon——"

"How *old* do you think I am?"

"Really I hadn't thought about it, Lord Dankmere."

"Oh."

Miss Vining resumed her reading.

When the Earl had sat on top of the table long enough he got down and dropped into the depths of an arm-chair.

"Miss Vining," he said.

"Yes?" incuriously.

"Have you thought it out yet?"

"Thought out what, Lord Dankmere?"

"How old I am."

"Really," she retorted, half laughing, half vexed, "do you suppose that my mind is occupied in wondering what your age might be?"

"Isn't it?"

"Of course not."

"Don't you want to know?"

She began to laugh again:

"Why, if you wish to tell me of course it will interest me *most* profoundly." And she made him a graceful little bow.

"I'm thirty-three," he said.

"Thank you so much for telling me."

"You are welcome," he returned gravely. "Do you think I'm too old?"

"Too old for what?"

"Oh, for anything interesting."

"What do you mean by 'interesting'?"

But Lord Dankmere apparently did not know what he did mean for he made no answer.

After a little while he said: "Wouldn't it be odd if I ever have income enough to pay off my debts?"

"What?"

He repeated the observation.

"I don't know what you mean. You naturally expect to pay them, don't you?"

"I saw no chance of doing so before Mr. Quarren took hold of these pictures."

She was sorry for him:

"Are you very deeply in debt?"

He named the total of his liabilities and she straightened her young shoulders, horrified.

"Oh, that's nothing," he said. "I know plenty of chaps in England who are far worse off."

"But—that is terrible!" she faltered.

Dankmere waved his hand:

"It's not so bad. That show business let me in for a lot."

"Why did you ever do it?"

"I like it," he explained simply.

She flushed: "It seems strange for a—a man of your kind to sing comic songs and dance before an audience."

"Not at all. I've a friend, Exford by name—who goes about grinding a barrel-organ."

"Why?"

"He likes to do it. . . . I've another pal of sorts who chucked the Guards to become a milliner. He always did like to crochet and trim hats. Why not?—if he likes it!"

"It is not," said Jessie Vining, "my idea of a British peer."

"But for Heaven's sake, consider the peer! Now and then they have an idea of what they'd like to do. Why not let them do it and be happy?"

"Then they ought not to have been born to the peerage," she said firmly.

"Many of them wouldn't have been had anybody consulted them."

"You?"

"It's brought me nothing but debt, ridicule, abuse, and summonses."

"You couldn't resign, could you?" she said, smiling.

"I *am* resigned. Oh, well, I'd rather be what I am than anything else, I fancy. . . . If the Topeka Museum trustees purchase that Gainsborough I'll be out of debt fast enough."

"And then?" she inquired, still smiling.

"I don't know. I'd like to start another show."

"And leave Mr. Quarren?"

"What use am I? We'd share alike; he'd manage the business and I'd manage a musical comedy I'm writing after hours——"

He jumped up and went to the piano where for the next ten minutes he rattled off some lively and very commonplace music which to Jessie Vining sounded like everything she had ever before heard.

"Do you like it?" he asked hopefully, swinging around on his stool.

"It's—lively."

"You *don't* like it!"

"I—it seems—very entertaining," she said, reddening.

The Earl sat looking at her in silence for a moment; then he said:

"To care for anything and make a failure of it—can you beat it for straight misery, Miss Vining?"

"Oh, please don't speak that way. I really am no judge of musical composition."

He considered the key-board gloomily; and resting one well-shaped hand on it addressed empty space:

"What's the use of liking to do a thing if you can't do it? Why the deuce should a desire torment a man when there's no chance of accomplishment?"

The girl looked at him out of her pretty, distressed eyes but found no words suitable for the particular moment.

Dankmere dropped the other hand on the keys, touched a chord or two softly, then drifted into the old-time melody, "Shannon Water."

His voice was a pleasantly modulated barytone when he chose; he sang the quaint and lovely old song in perfect taste. Then, very lightly, he sang "The Harp,"

and afterward an old Breton song made centuries ago.

When he turned Miss Vining was resting her head on both hands, eyes lowered.

"Those were the real musicians and poets," he said —"not these Strausses and 'Girls from the Golden West.'"

"Will you sing some more?"

"Do you like my singing?"

"Very much."

So he idled for another half hour at the piano, recalling half-forgotten melodies of the Age of Faith, which, like all art of that immortal age, can never again be revived. For art alone was not enough in those days, the creator of the beautiful was also endowed with Faith; all the world was so endowed; and it was such an audience as never again can gather to inspire any maker of beautiful things.

Quarren came up to listen; Jessie prepared tea; and the last golden hour of the afternoon drifted away to the untroubled harmonies of other days.

Later, Jessie, halting on the steps to draw on her gloves, heard Dankmere open the door behind her and come out.

They descended the steps together, and she was already turning north with a nod of good-night, when he said:

"Are you walking?"

She was, to save carfare.

"May I go a little way?"

"Yes—if——"

Lord Dankmere waited, but she did not complete whatever it was she had meant to say. Then, very

slowly she turned northward, and he went, too, grasping his walking-stick with unnecessary firmness and carrying himself with the determination and dignity of a man who is walking beside a pretty girl slightly taller than himself.

CHAPTER XIII

Strelsa had gone to town with her maid, remained there the entire afternoon, and returned to Witch-Hollow without seeing Quarren or even letting him know she was there.

It was the beginning of the end for her and she knew it; and she had already begun to move doggedly toward the end through the blind confusion of things, no longer seeing, hearing, heeding; impelled mechanically toward the goal which meant to her only the relief of absolute rest.

For her troubles were accumulating and she found in herself no resisting power—only the nervous strength left to get away from them. Troubles of every description were impending; some had already come upon her, like Quarren's last letter which she knew signified that the termination of their friendship was already in sight.

But other things were in sight, too, so she spent the afternoon in town with her lawyers; which lengthy séance resulted in the advertising for immediate sale of her house in town and its contents, her town car, brougham, victoria and three horses.

Through her lawyers, also, every jewel she possessed, all her wardrobe except what she had with her at Witch-Hollow, and her very beautiful collection of old lace, were placed in the hands of certain discreet people to dispose of privately.

Every servant in her employment except her maid was paid and dismissed; her resignation from the Province Club was forwarded, all social engagements for the summer cancelled.

There remained only two other matters to settle; and one of them could be put off—without hope of escape perhaps—but still it could be avoided for a little while longer.

The other was to write to Quarren; and she wrote as follows:

"I have been in town; necessity drove me, and I was too unhappy to see you. But this is the result: I can hold out a few months longer—to no purpose, I know—yet, you asked it of me, and I am trying to do it. Meanwhile the pressure never eases; I feel your unhappiness deeply—deeply, Rix!—and it is steadily wearing me out. And the pressure from Molly in your behalf, from Mrs. Sprowl by daily letter in behalf of Sir Charles, from Langly in his own interest never slackens for one moment.

"And that is not all; my late husband left no will, and I have steadily refused to make any contest for more than my dower rights.

"That has been swept away, now; urgent need has compelled me to offer for sale everything I possess except what wardrobe and unimportant trinkets I have with me.

"So many suits have been threatened and even commenced against me—you don't know, Rix—but while there remains any chance of meeting my obligations dollar for dollar I have refused to go through bankruptcy.

"I need not, now, I think. But the selling of everything will not leave me very much; and in the end my cowardice will do what you dread, and what I no longer fear, so utterly dead in me is every emotion, every nerve, every moral. Men bound to the wheel have slept; I want that sleep. I long for the insensibility, the endless lethargy that the mortally bruised crave; and that is all I hope or care for now.

"Love, as man professes it, would only hurt me—even yours. There can be no response from a soul and body stunned. Nothing must disturb their bruised coma.

"The man I intend to marry can evoke nothing in me, will demand nothing of me. That is already mutually understood. It's merely a bargain. He wants me as the ornament for the House of Sprowl. I can carry out the pact without effort, figure as the mistress of his domain, live life through unharassed as though I stood alone in a vague, warm dream, safe from anything real.

"Meanwhile, without aim, without hope, without even desire to escape my destiny, I am holding out because you ask it. To what end, my friend? Can you tell me?"

One morning Molly came into her room greatly perturbed, and Strelsa, still in bed, laid aside the New Testament which she had been reading, and looked up questioningly at her agitated hostess.

"It's your fault," began Molly without preliminaries—"that old woman certainly suspects what you're up to with her nephew or she wouldn't bother to come up here——"

"Who?" said Strelsa, sitting up. "Mrs. Sprowl?"

"Certainly, horse, foot, and dragoons! She's coming, I tell you, and there's only one motive for her advent!"

"But where will she stop?" asked Strelsa, flushing with dismay.

"Where do you suppose?"

"With Langly?"

"He wouldn't have her."

"She is not to be your guest, is she?"

"No. She wrote hinting that she'd come if asked. I pretended not to understand. I don't want her here. Every servant I have would leave—as a beginning. Besides I don't require the social prestige of such a visitation; and she knows that, too. So what do you think she's done?"

"I can't imagine," said Strelsa wearily.

"Well, she's manœuvred, somehow; and this morning's paper announces that she's to be entertained at South Linden by Mary Ledwith."

Strelsa reddened.

"Why should that concern me?" she asked calmly.

"Concern you, child! How can it help concerning you? Do you see what she's done?—do you count all the birds she's knocked over with one stone. Mary Ledwith returns from Reno and Mrs. Sprowl fixes and secures her social status by visiting her at once. And it's a perfectly plain notice to Langly, too, and—forgive me, dear!—to you!"

Strelsa scarlet and astonished, sat up rigid, her beautiful head thrown back.

"If she means it that way, it is slanderous," she said. "The entire story is a base slander! Did *you* believe it, Molly?"

"Believe it? Of course I believe it——"

"Why should you? Because a lot of vile newspapers have hinted at such a thing? I tell you it is an infamous story without one atom of truth in it——"

"How do you know?" asked Molly bluntly.

"Because Langly says so."

"Oh. Did you ask him?"

"No. He spoke of it himself."

"He denied it?"

"Absolutely on his word of honour."

"Then why didn't he sue a few newspapers?"

"He spoke of that, too. He said that his attorneys had advised him not to bring any actions because the papers had been too clever to lay themselves open to suits for libel."

"Oh," said Molly softly.

Strelsa, flushed, breathing rapidly and irregularly, sat there in bed watching her; but Molly avoided her brilliant, level gaze.

"There's no use in talking to you," she said, "but why on earth you don't marry Sir Charles——"

"Molly! Please don't——"

"—Or Rix——"

"Molly! Molly! *Can't* you let me alone! Can't we be together for ten minutes unless you urge me to marry somebody? Why do you want me to marry anybody!—Why——"

"But you're going to marry Langly, you say!"

"Yes, I am! I am! But can't you let me forget it for a moment or two? I—I'm not very well——"

"I can't help it," said Molly, grimly. "I'm sorry, darling, but the moment your engagement to Langly is

announced there'll be a horrid smash and some people are going to be spattered——"

"It *isn't* announced!" said the girl hotly. "Only you and Rix know about it except Langly and myself!"

Molly Wycherly rose from her chair, went over and seated herself on the foot of the bed:

"Tell me something, will you, Strelsa?"

"What?"

"Why does Langly desire to keep your engagement to him a secret?"

"He wishes it for the present."

"Why?"

"For that very reason!" said Strelsa, fiercely—"because of the injustice the papers have done him in this miserable Ledwith matter. He chooses to wait until it is forgotten—in order to shield me, I suppose, from any libellous comment——"

"You talk like a little idiot!" said Molly between her teeth. "Strelsa, I could shake you—if it would wake you up! Do you suppose for a moment that this Ledwith matter will be forgotten? Do you suppose if there were nothing in it but libel that he'd be afraid? You listen to me; that man is not apt to be afraid of anything, but he evidently *is* afraid, now! Of what, then?"

"Of my being annoyed by newspaper comment."

"And you think it's merely that?"

"Isn't it enough?"

Molly laughed:

"We're a hardened lot—some of us. But our most deadly fear is that the papers may *not* notice us. No matter what they say if they'll only say something!—that's our necessity and our unadmitted prayer. Be-

cause we've neither brains nor culture nor any distinguishing virtue or ability—and we're nothing—absolutely nothing unless the papers create us! Don't tell me that any one among us is afraid of publicity!—not in the particular circle where you and I and Langly and his aunt pursue our eccentric orbits!

"Plenty of wealthy and fashionable people dread publicity and shrink from it; plenty of them would gladly remain unchronicled and unsung. But it is not so among the fixed stars and planets and meteors and satellites of our particularly flamboyant constellation. I *know*. I also know that you don't really belong in it. But you'll either become accustomed to it or it will kill you if you don't drop—or soar, as you please—into some other section of eternal space."

She sat swinging her foot, flushed, animated, her eyes and colour brilliant—a slim, exquisitely groomed woman with all the superficial smoothness of a girl save for the wisdom in her eyes and in her smile, alas!

And the other's eyes reflected in their clear gray depths no such wisdom, only the haunting knowledge of sorrow and, vaguely, the inexplicable horror of man as he really is—or at least as she had only known him.

Still swinging her pretty foot, a deliberate smile edging her lips, Molly said:

"If you'll let me, I'll stand by you, darling."

Strelsa stared at her without comprehension, then dropped her head back on the pillows.

"If you'll let me stay with you a little while longer—that is all I ask," she said almost drowsily.

Molly sprang up, came around and kissed her, lightly: "Of course.. That was what I was going to ask of you."

"'If you'll let me, I'll

stand by you, darling.'"

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Strelsa closed her eyes. "I'll stay," she murmured.

Molly laid her own cool face down beside Strelsa's hot cheek, kneeling beside the bed.

"Dear," she whispered, "let us wait and see what happens. There's just one thing that has distorted your view—a dreadful experience with one man—two years of hell's own horror with one of its wretched inhabitants. I don't believe the impression is going to last a lifetime. I don't believe it is indelible. I believe somehow, some time you will learn that a man's love does not mean horror and degradation; that it is no abuse of friendship which offers love also, to return it with friendship only.

"Sir Charles offers that; and you refuse because you do not love him and will not use his friendship to aid yourself to material comfort.

"And I suspect you have said the same thing to Rix. Have you?"

The girl lay silent, eyes closed.

"Never mind; don't answer. I know you well enough to know that you said some such thing to Rix. . . . And it's all right in its way. But the alternative is not what you think it is—not this bargain with Langly for a place to lay your tired head—not this deal to decorate his name and estates in return for personal immunity. You are wrong—I'm not immoral, only unmoral—as many of us are—but you've gone all to pieces, dear—morally, mentally, nervously—and it's not from cowardice, not from depravity. It is the direct result of the two years of terror and desperate self-control—two years of courage—high moral courage, determination, self-suppression—and of the startling and dreadful climax.

" That is the blow you are now feeling—and the reaction even after two years more of half-stunned solitude. You are waking, darling; that is all. And it hurts."

Strelsa's bare arm moved a little, moved, groping, and tightened around Molly's neck. And they remained that way for a long while, Molly kneeling on the floor beside her.

" Don't you ever cry? " she whispered.

" Not—now."

" It would be better if you could."

" There are no tears—I—I am burnt out—all burnt out——"

" You need strength."

" I haven't the desire for it any longer."

" Not the desire to face things pluckily? "

" No—no longer. Everything's dead in me except the longing for—quiet. I'll pay any price for it—except misuse of friends."

" How could you misuse Rix by marrying him? "

" By accepting what I could never return."

" Love? "

" Yes."

" Does he ask that? "

" N-no—not now. But—he wants it. And I haven't it to give. So I can't take his—and let him work all his life for my comfort—I can't take it from Sir Charles and accept the position and fortune he offered me once——"

She lay silent a moment, then unclosed her eyes.

" Molly," she said, " I don't believe that Sir Charles is going to mind very much."

Molly met her eyes for an instant, very near, and a

pale flash of telepathy passed between them. Then Strelsa smiled.

"You mean Chrysos," said Molly.

"Yes. . . . Don't you think so?"

"She's little more than a child. . . . I don't know. Men are that way—men of Sir Charles's age and experience are likely to drift that way. . . . But if you are done with Sir Charles, what he does no longer interests me—except that the Lacys will become insufferable if——"

"Don't talk that way, dear."

"I don't *like* the family—except Chrysos."

"Then be glad for her—if it comes true. . . . Sir Charles is a dear—almost too perfectly ideal to be a man. . . . I do wish it for his sake. . . . He was a little unhappy over me I think."

"He adores you still, you little villain!" whispered Molly, fondling her. "But—let poets sing and romancers rave—there's nothing that starves as quickly as love. And Sir Charles has been long fasting—good luck to him and more shame on you!"

Strelsa laughed, cleared her brow and eyes of the soft bright hair, and, flinging out both arms, took Molly to her heart in a swift, hard embrace.

"There!" she said, breathless, "I adore you anyhow, Molly. . . . I feel better, too. I'm glad you talked to me. . . . Do you think I'll get anything for my house?"

"Yes, when you sell it. That's the hopeless part of it just at this time of year——"

"Perhaps my luck will turn," said Strelsa. "You know I've had an awful lot of the other kind all my life."

They laughed.

Strelsa went on: "Perhaps when I sell everything I'll have enough left over to buy a little house up here near you, Molly, and have pigs and chickens and a cow!"

"How long could you stand that kind of existence, silly?"

Strelsa looked gravely back at her, then with a sigh: "It seems as though I could stand it forever, now. You know I seem to be changing a little all the while. First, when Mrs. Sprowl found me at Colorado Springs and persuaded me to come to New York I was mad for pleasure—crazy about anything that promised gaiety and amusement—anything to make me forget.

"You know I never went anywhere in Colorado Springs; I was too ill—ill most of the time. . . . And Mrs. Sprowl said she knew my mother—it's curious, but mother never said anything about her—and she cared for fashionable people.

"So I came to New York last winter—and you know the rest—I got tired physically, first; then so many wanted to marry me—and so many women urged me to do so many things—and I was unhappy about Rix—and then came this awful financial crash——"

"Stop thinking of it!"

"Yes; I mean to. I only wanted you to understand how, one by one, emotions and desires have been killed in me during the last four years. . . . And even the desire for wealth and position—which I clung to up to yesterday—somehow, now—this morning—has become little more than a dreamy wish. . . . I'd rather have quiet if I could—if there's enough money left to let me rest somewhere——"

"There will be," said Molly, watching her.

"Do you think so? And—then there would be no necessity for—for——"

"Langly!"

Strelsa flushed. "I wonder," she mused. "I wonder whether—but it seems impossible that I should suddenly find I didn't care for everything I cared for this winter. Perhaps I'm too tired to care just now."

"It might be," said Molly, "that something—for example your friendship with Rix—had made other matters seem less important."

The girl looked up quickly, saw nothing in Molly's expression to disturb her, then turned her eyes away, and lay silent, considering.

If her friendship for Quarren had imperceptibly filled her mind, even crowding aside other and most important matters, she did not realise it. She thought of it now, and of him—recalling the letter she had written.

Vaguely she was aware of the difference in her attitude toward life since she wrote that letter only a few days before. To what was it due? To his letter in reply now lying between the leaves of her New Testament on the table beside her? This was his letter:

"Hold out, Strelsa! Matters are going well with me. Your tide, too, will turn before you know it. But neither man nor woman is going to aid you, only time, Strelsa, and—something that neither you nor I have bothered about very much—something that has many names in many tongues—but they all mean the same. And the symbol of what they mean is Truth.

"Why not study it? We never have. All sages of all times have studied it and found comfort; all saints in all ages have found in it strength.

"I find its traces in every ancient picture that I touch. But there are books still older that have lived because of it. And one man died for it—man or God as you will—the former is more fashionable.

"Lives that have been lived because of it, given for it, forgiven for its sake, are worth our casual study.

"For they say there is no greater thing than Truth. I can imagine no greater. And the search for it is interesting—fascinating—I had no idea how absorbing until recently—until I first saw you, who sent me out into the world to work.

"Hold out—and study this curious subject of Truth for a little while. Will you?

"If you'll only study it a while I promise that it will interest you—not in its formalisms, not in its petty rituals and observances, nor in its endless nomenclature, nor its orthodoxy—but just as you discover it for yourself in the histories of men and women—of saint and sinner—and, above all, in the matchless life of Him who understood them all.

"*Non tu corpus eras sine pectore!*"

Lying there, remembering his letter almost word for word, and where it now lay among printed pages incomprehensible to her except by the mechanical processes of formal faith and superficial observance, she wondered how much that, and the scarcely scanned printed page, might have altered her views of life.

Molly kissed her again and went away downstairs.

When she was dressed in her habit she went out to the lawn's edge where Langly and the horses had already gathered: he put her up, and they cantered away down the wooded road that led to South Linden.

After their first gallop they slowed to a walk on the farther hill slope, chatting of inconsequential things; and it seemed to her that he was in unusually good spirits—almost gay for him—and his short dry laugh rang out once or twice; which was more than she had heard from him in a week.

From moment to moment she glanced sideways at him, curiously inspecting the sleek-headed symmetry of the man, noticing, as always, his perfectly groomed figure, his narrow head and the well-cut lines of the face and jaw. Once she had seen him—the very first time she had ever met him at Miami—eating a broiled lobster. And somehow his healthy appetite, the clean incision of his sun-bronzed jaw and the working muscles, chewing and swallowing, fascinated her; and she never saw him but she thought of him eating vigorously aboard the *Yulan.*

"Langly," she said, "is it going to be disagreeable for you when Mrs. Ledwith returns to South Linden?"

He looked at her leisurely, eyes, as always, slightly protruding:

"Why?"

"The newspapers."

"Probably," he said.

"Then—what are you going to do about it?"

"About what?"

"The papers."

"Nothing."

"Or—about Mrs. Ledwith?"

"Be civil if I see her."

"Of course," she said, reddening. "I was wondering whether gossip might be nipped in the bud if you

left before she arrives and remained away until she leaves."

His prominent eyes were searching her features all the while she was speaking; now they wandered restlessly over the landscape.

"It's my fashion," he said, "to face things as they come."

"If you don't mind I'd rather have you go," she said.

"Where?"

"Anywhere you care to."

He said: "I have told you a thousand times that the thing to do is to take Molly Wycherly 'board the *Yulan*, and——"

"I do not care to do it until our engagement is announced."

"Very well," he said, swinging around in his saddle, "I'll announce it to-day and we'll go aboard this evening and clear out."

"Wh-what!" she faltered.

"There's no use waiting any longer," he said. "Mrs. Ledwith and my fool of an aunt are coming to-morrow. Did you know that? Well, they are. And every dirty newspaper in town will make the matter insidiously significant! If my aunt hadn't taken it into her head to visit Mrs. Ledwith at this particular moment, there would have been few comments. As it is there'll be plenty—and I don't feel like putting up with them—I don't propose to for my own sake. The time comes, sooner or later, when a man has got to consider himself."

After a short silence Strelsa raised her gray eyes: "Has it occurred to you to consider me, Langly?"

"What? Certainly. Haven't I been doing that ever since we've been engaged——"

"I—wonder," she mused.

"What else have I been doing?" he insisted—"denying myself the pleasure of you when I'm half crazy about you——"

"What!"

A dull flush settled under his prominent cheek-bones: he looked straight ahead of him between his horse's ears as he rode, sitting his saddle like the perfect horseman he was, although his mount felt the savage pain of a sudden and reasonless spurring and the wicked curb scarcely controlled him.

Strelsa set her lips, not looking at either horse or man on her right, nor even noticing her own mare who was cutting up in sympathy with the outraged hunter at her withers.

"Langly?"

"Yes?"

"Has it ever occurred to you how painful such scandalous rumours must be for Mrs. Ledwith?"

"Can I help them?"

Strelsa said, thoughtfully: "What a horrible thing for a woman! It was generous of your aunt to show people what *she* thought of such cruel stories."

"Do you think," he said sneeringly, "that my excellent aunt was inspired by any such motive? You might as well know—if you don't know already—" and his pale eyes rested a moment on the girl beside him—"that my aunt is visiting Mrs. Ledwith solely to embarrass me!"

"How could it embarrass you?"

"By giving colour to the lies told about me and the

Ledwiths," he said in a hard voice—"by hinting that Mary Ledwith, free to marry, is accepted by my aunt; and the rest is up to me! That's what that female relative of mine has just done—" His big, white teeth closed with a click and he spurred his horse cruelly again and checked him until the slavering creature almost reared over backward.

"If you maltreat that horse again, Langly, I'll leave you. Do you understand?" she said, exasperated.

"I beg your pardon—" Again his jaw fairly snapped, but the horse did not suffer from his displeasure.

"What has enraged you so?" she demanded.

"This whole business. There isn't anything my aunt could have done more vicious, more contemptible, than to visit Mrs. Ledwith at this moment. I'll get it from every quarter, now."

"I suppose she will, too."

"My aunt? No such luck!"

"I mean Mrs. Ledwith."

"She? Oh, I suppose so."

Strelsa said between tightening lips:

"Is there nothing you can do, no kindness, no sacrifice you can make to shield Mrs. Ledwith?"

He stared at her, then his eyes roamed restlessly:

"How?"

"I don't know, Langly. . . . But if there is anything you could do——"

"What? My aunt and the papers are determined that I shall marry her! I take it that you are not suggesting that, are you?"

"I am suggesting nothing," she replied in a low voice.

"Well, *I* am. I'm suggesting that you and Molly and I go aboard the *Yulan* and clear out to-night!"

"You mean—to announce our engagement first?"

"Just as you choose," he said without a shade of expression on his features.

"You would scarcely propose that I sail with you under any other circumstances," she said sharply.

"I leave it to you and Mrs. Wycherly. The main idea is to clear out and let them howl and tear things up."

"Howl at Mrs. Ledwith and tear her to tatters while we start around the world on the *Yulan?*" nodded Strelsa. She was rather white, but she laughed; and he, hearing her, turned and laughed, too—a quick bark of a laugh that startled both horses who were unaccustomed to it.

"Oh, I guess they won't put her out of business," he said. "She's young and handsome and there are plenty of her sort to marry her—even Dankmere would have a chance there or—" he hesitated, and decided to refrain. But she understood perfectly, and lost the remainder of her colour.

"You mean Mr. Quarren," she said coolly.

"I didn't," he replied, lying. And she was aware of his falsehood, too.

"What started those rumours about Mrs. Ledwith and you, Langly?" she asked in the same pleasantly even tone, and turned her horse's head toward home at the same time. He made his mount pivot showily on his hocks and drew bridle beside her.

"Oh, they started at Newport."

"How?"

"How do I know? Ledwith and I were connected

in business matters; I saw more or less of them both—and he was too busy to be with his wife every time I happened to be with her. So—you know what they said."

"Yes. When you and she were lunching at different tables at the Santa Regina you used to write notes to her, and everybody saw you."

"What of it?"

"Nothing."

"That is just it; there was nothing in it."

"Except her reputation. . . . What a silly and careless girl! But a man doesn't think—doesn't care very much I fancy. And then everybody was offensively sorry for Chester Ledwith. But that was not your look-out, was it, Langly?"

Sprowl turned his narrow face and looked at her in silence; and after a moment misjudged her.

"It was not my fault," he said quietly. "I liked his wife and I was friendly with him until his gutter habits annoyed me."

"He went to pieces, didn't he?"

Once more Sprowl inspected her features, warily. Once more he misjudged her.

"He's gone to smash," he said—"but what's that to us?"

"I wonder," she smiled, but had to control the tremor of her lower lip by catching it between her teeth and looking away from the man beside her. Quickly the hint of tears dried out in her gray eyes—from whatever cause they sprang glimmering there to dim her eyesight. She bent her head, absently arranging, rearranging and shifting her bridle.

"The thing to do," he said, curling his long mous-

tache with powerful fingers—" is for the Wycherlys to stand by us now—and the others there—that little Lacy girl—and Sir Charles if he chooses. We'll have to take the whole lot of them aboard I suppose."

" Suppose I go with you alone," she said in a low voice.

He started in his saddle, turned on her a face that was reddening heavily. For an instant she scarcely recognised him, so thick his lips seemed, so congested the veins in forehead and neck. He seemed all mouth and eyes and sanguine colour—and big, even teeth, now, as the lips drew aside disclosing them.

" Would you do that, Strelsa? "

" Why not? "

" Would you do it—for me? "

Her rapid breathing impeded speech; she said something inarticulate; he leaned from his saddle and caught her in his left arm.

" By God," he stammered, " I knew it! You can have what you like from me—I don't care what it is!—take it—fill out your own checks—only let's get out of here before those damned women ruin us both! "

She had strained back and aside from him, and was trying to guide her mare away, but his powerful arm crushed her and his hot breath fell on her face and neck.

" You can have it your own way I tell you—I swear to God I'll marry you——"

" What! "

Almost strangled she wrenched herself free, panting, staring; and he realised his mistake.

" We can't get a licence if we leave to-night," he said, breathing heavily. " But we can touch at any port and manage that."

"You—you *would* take me—permit me to go—in such a manner?" she breathed, still staring at him.

"It's necessity, isn't it? Didn't you propose it? It makes no difference to me, Strelsa. I told you I'd do anything you wished."

"What did you mean—what did you mean by—by—" But she could go no further in speech or thought.

"The thing to do," he said calmly, "is not to fly off our heads or become panic-stricken. You're doing the latter; I lost control of myself—after what you gave me to hope—after what you said—showing your trust in me," he added, moistening his thick dry lips with his tongue. "I lost my self-command—because I *am* crazy for you, Strelsa—there's no sense in pretending otherwise—and you knew it all the time, you little coquette!

"What do you think a man's made of? You wanted a business arrangement and I humoured you; but you knew all the while, and I knew, that—that I am infatuated, absolutely mad about you." He added, boldly: "And I have reason to think it doesn't entirely displease you, haven't I?"

She did not seem to hear him. He laid his gloved hand over hers, and recoiled before her eyes as from a blow.

"Are you angry?" he asked.

Her teeth were still working on her under lip. She made no answer.

"Strelsa—if you really feel nothing for me—if you mean what you have said about a purely business agreement—I will hold to it. I thought for a moment—when you said—something in your smile made me think——"

"You need not think any further," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I came with you this morning to tell you that I will not marry you."

"That's nonsense! I've hurt you—made you angry——"

"I came for that reason," she repeated. "I meant to do it as soon as I had the courage. I meant to do it gently. Now I don't care how I do it. It's enough for you to know that I will not marry you."

"Is that final?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it. I know perfectly well I was—was too impulsive, too ardent——"

She turned her face away with a faint, sick look at the summer fields where scores of birds sang in the sunshine.

"See here," he said, his manner changing, "I tell you I'm sorry. I ask your pardon. Whatever you wish shall be done. Tell me what to do."

After a few moments she turned toward him again.

"A few minutes ago I could have told you what to do. I would have told you to marry Mary Ledwith. Also I would have been wrong. Now, as you ask me, I tell you not to marry her."

His eyes were deadly dangerous, but she met them carelessly.

"No," she said, "don't marry any woman after your attentions have made her conspicuous. It will be pleasanter for her to be torn to pieces by her friends."

"You are having your vengeance," he said. "Take it to the limit, Strelsa, and then let us be reconciled."

"No, it is too late. It was too late even before we started out together. Why—I didn't realise it then—

but it was too late long ago—from the day you spoke as you did in my presence to Mr. Quarren. That finished you, Langly—if, indeed, you ever really began to mean anything at all to me."

He made a last effort and the veins stood out on his forehead:

"I am sorry I spoke to Quarren as I did. I like him."

She said coolly: "You hate him. You and Mr. Caldera almost ruined him in that acreage affair."

"You are mistaken. Caldera squeezed him; I did not. I knew nothing about it. My agents attend to such petty matters. What motive have I for disliking Quarren?"

She shrugged her shoulders disdainfully: "Perhaps because you thought he was devoted to me—and I to him. . . . And you were right," she added: "I am devoted to him because he is a man and a clean one."

"Have you ended?"

"Ended what?"

"Punishing me."

Her lips curled slightly: "I am afraid you are inclined to self-flattery, Langly. We chasten those whom we care for."

"Are you silly enough to dismiss me through sheer pique?" he said between his teeth.

"Pique? I don't understand. I've merely concluded that I don't need your fortune and I don't want your name. You, personally, never figured in the proposed arrangement."

His visage altered alarmingly:

"Who have you got on the string now!" he broke out—"you little adventuress! What damned fool is

damned fool enough to marry you when anybody could get you for less if they care to spend the time on you——".

Suddenly his arm shot out and he wrenched her bridle, dragging her horse around and holding him there.

"Are you mad?" she whispered, white to the lips. "Take your hand off my bridle!"

"For another word," he said between clinched teeth, "I'd ride you down and spoil that face of yours! Hold your tongue and listen to me. I've stood all I'm going to from you. I've done all the cringing and boot-licking that is going to be done. You're the sort that needs curb and spurs, and you'll get them if you cut up with me. Is that plain?"

She had carried no crop that morning or she would have used it; her bridle was useless; spurring might have dragged them both down under the horses' feet.

"For the last time," he said, "you listen to me. I love you. I want you. You haven't a cent; you could fill out any check you chose to draw over my signature. Now if you are not crazy, or a hopeless fool, behave yourself."

A great sob choked her; she forced it back and sat, waiting, eyes almost closed.

"Strelsa, answer me!"

There was no reply.

"Answer me, for God's sake!"

She opened her eyes.

"Will you marry me?"

"No."

His eyes seemed starting from his head and the

deep blood rushed to his face and neck, and he flung her bridle into her face with an inarticulate sound.

Then, slowly, side by side they advanced along the road together. A groom met them at Witch-Hollow; Strelsa slipped from her saddle without aid and, leisurely, erect, smiling, walked up to the veranda where Molly stood reading the morning paper.

"Hello dear," she said. "Am I very late for luncheon?"

"It's over. Will you have a tray out here?"

"May I?"

"Don't you want to change, first?"

"Yes, thanks."

Molly glanced up from the paper:

"Isn't Langly stopping for luncheon with you?"

"No."

Molly looked at her curiously:

"Did you enjoy your gallop?"

"We didn't gallop much."

"Spooned?"

Strelsa shuddered slightly. The elder woman dropped her paper and gazed at her.

"You don't mean to say it's all off, Strelsa!"

"Entirely. Please don't let's speak of it again—or of him—if you don't mind——"

"I don't!—you darling!—you poor darling! What has that creature done to *you?*"

"Don't speak of him, please."

"No, I won't. Oh, I'm so glad, Strelsa!—I can't tell you how happy, how immensely relieved—and that cat of an aunt of his here to make mischief!—and poor Mary Ledwith——".

"'Is it to be Sir Charles after all,

darling?" she asked caressingly."

"Molly, I—I simply can't talk about it—any of it——"

She turned abruptly, entered the house, and ran lightly up the stairs. Molly waited for her, grimly content with the elimination of Langly Sprowl and already planning separate campaigns in behalf of Sir Charles and Quarren.

She was still absorbed in her scheming when Strelsa came down. There was not a trace of any emotion except pleasure in her face. In her heart it was the same; only an immense, immeasurable relief reigned there, calming and exciting her alternately. But her face was yet a trifle pale; her hands still unsteady; and every delicate nerve, slowly relaxing from the tension, was regaining its normal quiet by degrees.

Her appetite was excellent, however. Afterward she and Molly chose neighbouring rockers, and Molly, lighting a cigarette, opened fire:

"Is it to be Sir Charles after all, darling?" she asked caressingly.

Strelsa laughed outright, then, astonished that she had not shrunk from a renewal of the eternal pressure, looked at Molly with wide gray eyes.

"I don't know what's the matter with me to-day," she said; "I seem to be able to laugh. I've not been very well physically; I've had a ghastly morning; I'm homeless and wretchedly poor—and I'm laughing at it all—the whole thing, Molly. What do you suppose is the matter with me?"

"You're not in love, are you?" asked Molly with calm suspicion.

"No, I'm not," said the girl with a quiet conviction that disconcerted the elder woman.

"Then I don't see why you should be very happy," said Molly honestly.

Strelsa considered: "Perhaps it's because to-day I feel unusually well. I slept—which I don't usually."

"You're becoming devout, too," said Molly.

"Devout? Oh, you saw me reading in my Testament. . . . It's an interesting book, Molly," she said naïvely. "You know, as children, and at school, and in church we don't read it with any intelligence—or listen to it in the right way. . . . People *are* odd. We have our moments of contrition, abasement, fright, exaltation; but at bottom we know that our religion and a fair observance of it is a sound policy of insurance. We accept it as we take out insurance in view of eventualities and the chance of future fire——"

"That's flippant," said Molly.

"I really didn't mean it so. . . . I was wondering about it all. Recently, re-reading the New Testament, I was struck by finding so much in it that I had never noticed or understood. . . . You know, Molly, after all Truth is the greatest thing in the world."

"So I've heard," observed Molly drily.

"Oh, I've heard it, too, but never thought what it meant—until recently. You see Truth, to me, was just telling it as often as possible. I never thought much about it—that it is the basis of everything worthy and beautiful—such as old pictures—" she added vaguely—"and those things that silversmiths like Benvenuto Cellini did——"

"What?"

Strelsa coloured: "Everything worthy is founded on Truth," she said.

"That sounds like Tupper or a copy-book," said

Molly, laughing. "For surely those profound reflections never emanated originally from you or Rix—did they?"

Strelsa, much annoyed, picked up the field glasses and levelled them on the river.

Sir Charles was out there in a launch with Chrysos Lacy. Chrysos fished and Sir Charles baited her hook.

"That's a touching sight," said Strelsa, laughing.

Molly said crossly: "Well, if you don't want him, for goodness' sake say so!—and let me have some credit with the Lacys for engineering the thing."

"Take it, darling!" laughed the girl, "take the credit and let the cash go—to Chrysos!"

"How indelicate you *can* be, Strelsa!"

"Oh, I am. I'm in such rude health that it's almost vulgar. After all, Molly, there's an immense relief in getting rid of your last penny and knowing nothing worse can happen to you."

"You might die."

"I don't care."

"Everybody cares whether they live or die."

The girl looked at her, surprised.

"I don't," she said, "—really."

"Of course you do."

"But why should I?"

"Nonsense, Strelsa. No matter how they crack up Heaven, nobody is in a hurry to go there."

"I wasn't thinking of Heaven. . . . I was just curious to see what else there is—I'm in no hurry, but it has always interested me. . . . I've had a theory that perhaps to everybody worthy is given, hereafter, exactly the kind of heaven they expect—to Buddhist, Brahman, Mohammedan, Christian—to the Shinto priest

as well as to the Sagamore. . . . There's plenty of time —I'm in no hurry, nor would it be too soon to-morrow for me to find out how near I am to the truth."

"You're morbid, child!"

"Less this very moment than for years. . . . Molly, do you know that I am getting well? I wish you knew how well I feel."

But Molly was no longer listening. High above the distant hangars where the men had gathered since early morning, a great hawk-like thing was soaring in circles. And already the distant racket of another huge winged thing came to her ears on the summer wind.

"I hope Jim will be careful," she said.

CHAPTER XIV

Into the long stables at South Linden, that afternoon, Langly Sprowl's trembling horse was led limping, his velvet flanks all torn by spurs and caked with mud, his tender mouth badly lacerated.

As for his master, it seemed that the ruin of the expensive hunter and four hours' violent and capricious exercise in his reeking saddle had merely whetted his appetite for more violence; and he had been tramping for an hour up and down the length of the library in his big sprawling house when Mr. Kyte, his confidential secretary, came in without knocking.

Sprowl hearing his step swung on him savagely, but Kyte coolly closed the door behind him and turned the key.

"Ledwith is here," he said.

"Ledwith," repeated Sprowl, mechanically.

"Yes, he's on the veranda. They said you were not at home. He said he'd wait. I thought you ought to know. He acts queerly."

Langly's protruding eyes became utterly expressionless.

"All right," he said in dismissal.

Kyte still lingered:

"Is there anything I can say or do?"

"If there was I'd tell you, wouldn't I?"

Kyte's lowered gaze stole upward toward his em-

ployer, sustained his expressionless glare for a second, then shifted.

"Very well," he said unlocking the library door; "I thought he might be armed, that's all."

"Kyte!"

Mr. Kyte turned on the door-sill.

"What do you mean by saying that?"

"Saying what?"

"That you think this fellow Ledwith may be armed?"

Kyte stood silent.

"I ask you again," repeated Sprowl, "why you infer that this man might have armed himself to visit this house?"

Kyte's eyes stole upward, were instantly lowered. Sprowl walked over to him.

"You're paid to act, not think; do you understand?" he said in a husky, suppressed voice; but his long fingers were twitching.

"I understand," said Kyte.

Sprowl's lean head jerked; Kyte went; and the master of the house strode back into the library and resumed his pacing.

Boots, spurs, the skirts of his riding coat, even his stock were stained with mud and lather; and there was a spot or two across his sun-tanned cheeks.

Presently he walked to the bay-window which commanded part of the west veranda, and looking out through the lace curtains saw Ledwith sitting there, his sunken eyes fixed on the westering sun.

The man's clothing hung loosely on his frame, showing bony angles at elbow and knee. Burrs and black swamp-mud stuck to his knickerbockers and golf-stock-

ings; he sat very still save for a constant twitching of the muscles.

The necessity for nervous and physical fatigue drove Sprowl back into the library to tramp up and down over the soft old Saraband rugs, up and down, to and fro, and across sometimes, ranging the four walls with the dull, aimless energy of a creature which long caging is rendering mentally unsound.

Then the monotony of the exercise began to irritate instead of allaying his restlessness; he went to the bay-window again, saw Ledwith still sitting there, stared at him with a ferocity almost expressionless, and strode out into the great hallway and through the servant-watched doors to the veranda.

Ledwith looked up, rose. "How are you, Langly?" he said.

Sprowl nodded, staring him insolently in the face.

There was a pause, then Ledwith's pallid features twitched into a crooked smile.

"I wanted to talk over one or two matters with you before I leave," he said.

"When are you leaving?"

"To-night."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know—to the Acremont Inn for a few days. After that—I don't know."

Sprowl, perfectly aware that his footman was listening, walked out across the lawn, and Ledwith went with him. Neither spoke. Shadows of tall trees lay like velvet on the grass; the crests of the woods beyond grew golden, their depths dusky and bluish. Everywhere robins were noisily at supper, tilting for earthworms on the lawns; golden-winged woodpeckers imitated them;

in the late sunlight the grackles' necks were rainbow tinted.

On distant hillcrests Sprowl could see his brood-mares feeding, switching their tails against the sky; farther away sheep dotted hillside pastures. Farther still the woods of Witch-Hollow lay banded with sunshine and shadow. And Sprowl's protuberant gaze grew fixed and expressionless as he swung on across the meadows and skirted the first grove of oaks, huge outlying pickets of his splendid forest beyond.

"We can talk here," said Ledwith in a voice which sounded hoarse and painful; and, swinging around on him, Sprowl saw that he was in distress, fighting for breath and leaning against the trunk of an oak.

"What do you want to talk about?" said Sprowl.

The struggle for breath left Ledwith mute.

"Can't you walk and talk at the same time?" demanded Sprowl. "I need exercise."

"I've got to rest."

"Well, then, what have you got to say?—because I'm going on. What's the matter with you, anyway," he added sneeringly; "dope?"

"Partly," said Ledwith without resentment.

"What else?"

"Anxiety."

"Oh. Do you think you have a monopoly of that?"

Ledwith, without heeding the sneering question, went on, still resting on his elbow against the tree-trunk:

"I want to talk to you, Langly. I want straight talk from you. Do I get it?"

"You'll get it; go on," said Sprowl contemptuously.

"Then—my wife has returned."

"Your ex-wife," corrected Sprowl without a shade of expression in voice or features.

"Yes," said Ledwith—"Mary. I left the house before she arrived, on my way to Acremont across country. She and your aunt drove up together. I saw them from the hill."

"Very interesting," said Sprowl. "Is that all?"

Ledwith detached himself from the tree and stood aside, under it, looking down at the grass.

"You are going to marry her of course," he said.

"That," retorted Sprowl, "is none of your business."

"Because," continued Ledwith, not heeding him, "that is the only thing possible. There is nothing else for her to do—for you to do. She knows it, you know it, and so do I."

"I know all about it," said Sprowl coolly. "Is there anything else?"

"Only your word to confirm what I have just said."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your marriage with Mary."

"I think I told you that it was none of your business."

"Perhaps you did. But I've made it my business."

"May I ask why?"

"Yes, you may ask, Langly, and I'll tell you. It's because, recently, there have been rumours concerning you and a Mrs. Leeds. That's the reason."

Sprowl's hands, hanging at his sides, began nervously closing and unclosing:

"Is that all, Ledwith?"

"That's all—when you have confirmed what I have

said concerning the necessity for your marriage with the woman you debauched."

"You lie," said Langly.

Ledwith smiled. "No," he said wearily, "I don't. She admitted it to me."

"That is another lie."

"Ask her. She didn't care what she said to me any more than she cared, after a while, what she did to me. You made her yours, soul and body; she became only your creature, caring less and less for concealment as her infatuation grew from coquetry to imprudence, from recklessness to effrontery. . . . It's the women of our sort, who, once misled, stop at nothing—not the men. Prudence to the point of cowardice is the amatory characteristic of your sort. . . . I don't mean physical cowardice," he added, lifting his sunken eyes and letting them rest on Sprowl's powerful frame.

"Have you finished?" asked the latter.

"In a moment, Langly. I am merely reminding you of what has happened. Concerning myself I have nothing to say. Look at me. You know what I was; you see what I am. I'm not whining; it's all in a lifetime. And the man who is not fitted to take care of what is his, loses. That's all."

Sprowl's head was averted after an involuntary glance at the man before him. His face was red—or it may have been the ruddy evening sun striking flat across it.

Ledwith said: "You will marry her, of course. But I merely wish to hear you say so."

Sprowl swung on him, his thick lips receding:

"I'll marry whom I choose! Do you understand that?"

"Of course. But you will choose to marry her."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Or—I'll kill you," he said seriously.

Langly stared at him, every vein suddenly dark and swollen; then his bark of a laugh broke loose.

"I suppose you've got it in your pocket," he said.

Ledwith fumbled in his coat pocket and produced a dully blued weapon of heavy calibre; and Sprowl walked slowly up to him, slapped his face, took the revolver from him, and flung it into the woods.

"Now go home and punch yourself full of dope," he said; swung on his heel, and sauntered off.

Ledwith looked after him, one bloodless hand resting on the cheek which Sprowl had struck—watched him out of sight. Then, patiently, he started to search for the weapon, dropping on all-fours, crawling, peering, parting the ferns and bushes. But the sun was low and the woods dusky, and he could not find what he was looking for. So he sat up on the ground among the dead leaves of other years, drew from his pocket what he needed, and slowly bared his scarred arm to the shoulder.

As for Sprowl, his vigorous tread lengthened to a swinging stride as he shouldered his way through a thicket and out again into the open.

Already he scarcely remembered Ledwith at all, or his menace, or the blow; scarcely even recollected that Mary Ledwith had returned or that his aunt was within driving distance of his own quarters.

A dull hot anguish, partly rage, possessed him, tormenting brain and heart incessantly and giving him no rest. His own clumsy madness in destroying what he believed had been a certainty—his stupidity, his loss of

self-control, not only in betraying passion prematurely but in his subsequent violence and brutality, almost drove him insane.

Never before in any affair with women had he forgotten caution in any crisis; his had been a patience unshakable when necessary, a dogged, driving persistence when the time came, the subtlety of absolute inertness when required. But above all and everything else he has been a master of patience, and so a master of himself; and so he had usually won.

And now—now in this crisis—a crisis involving the loss of what he cared for enough to marry—if he must marry to have his way with her—what was to be done?

He tried to think coolly, but the cinders of rage and passion seemed to stir and move with every breath he drew awaking the wild fire within.

He would try to reason and think clearly—try to retrace matters to the beginning and find out why he had blundered when everything was in his own hands.

It was his aunt's sudden policy that betrayed him into a premature move—Mary Ledwith's return, and his aunt's visit. Mary Ledwith was there to marry him; his aunt to make mischief unless he did what was expected of him.

Leisurely but thoroughly he cursed them both as he walked back across his lawn. But he was already thinking of Strelsa again when, as he entered the wide hall, his aunt waddled across the rugs of the drawing-room, pronouncing his name with unmistakable decision. And, before the servants, he swallowed the greeting he had hoped to give her, and led her into the library.

"Mercy on us, Langly!" she exclaimed, eyeing his

reeking boots and riding-breeches; "do you live like a pig up here?"

"I've been out," he said briefly. "What do you want?"

Her little green eyes lighted up, and her smile, which was fading, she forced into a kind of fixed grin.

"Your polished and thoughtful inquiry is characteristic of you," she said. "Mary is here, and I want you to come over to dinner."

"I'm not up to it," he said.

"I want you to come."

"I tell you I'm not up to it," he said bluntly.

"And I tell you that you'd better come."

"*Better* come?" he repeated.

"Yes, *better* come. More than that, Langly, you'd better behave yourself, or I'll make New York too hot to hold you."

His prominent eyes were expressionless.

"Ah?" he remarked.

"Exactly, my friend. Your race is run. You've done one thing too publicly to squirm out of the consequences. The town has stood for a good deal from you. When that girl at the Frivolity Theatre shot herself, leaving a letter directed to you, the limit of public patience was nearly reached. You had to go abroad, didn't you? Well, you can't go abroad this time. Neither London nor Paris nor Vienna nor Budapest—no, nor St. Petersburg nor even Constantinople would stand you! Your course is finished. If you've an ounce of brains remaining you know that you're done for this time. So go and dress and come over to dinner. . . . And don't worry; I'll keep away from you after you're married."

"You'll keep your distance before that," he said slowly.

"You're mistaken. Many people are afraid of you, but I never was and never could be. You're no good; you never were. If you didn't lug my name about with you I'd let you go to hell. You'll go there anyway, but you'll go married first."

"I expect to."

"Married to Mary Ledwith," she said looking at him.

He picked up a cigar, examined it, yawned, then glanced at her:

"As I had—recently— occasion to tell Chester Ledwith, I'll marry whom I please. Now suppose you clear out."

"Are you dining with us?"

"No."

"What time may we expect you to-morrow?"

"At no time."

"Do you intend to marry Mary Ledwith?"

"No."

"Is that final?"

"Yes!"

"Do you expect to marry anybody else?"

"Yes!" he shouted, partly rising from his chair, his narrow face distorted. "Yes, I do! Now you know, don't you! Is the matter settled at last? Do you understand clearly?—you fat-headed, meddlesome old fool!"

He sprang to his feet in an access of fury and began loping up and down the room, gesticulating, almost mouthing out his hatred and abuse—rendered more furious still by the knowledge of his own weakness and dis-

integration—his downfall from that silent citadel of self-control which had served him so many years as a stronghold for defiance or refuge.

"You impertinent old woman!" he shouted, "if you don't keep your fat nose out of my affairs I'll set a thousand men tampering with the foundations of your investments! Keep your distance and mind your business—I warn you now and for the last time, or else—" He swung around on her, and the jaw muscles began to work—"or else I'll supply the Yellows with a few facts concerning that Englishman's late father and yourself!"

Mrs. Sprowl's face went pasty-white; in the fat, colourless expanse only the deathless fury of her eyes seemed alive.

"So *that* fetched you," he observed, coolly. "I don't want to give you apoplexy; I don't want you messing up my house. I merely want you to understand that it's dangerous to come sniffing and nosing around my threshold. You *do* understand, I guess."

He continued his promenade but presently came back to her:

"You know well enough who I want to marry. If you say or do one thing to interfere I'll see that you figure in the Yellows."

He thought a moment; the colour slowly returned to her face. After a fit of coughing she struggled to rise from her chair. He let her pant and scuffle and kick for a while, then opened the door and summoned her footman.

"I'm sorry I cannot drive with you this evening," he said quietly, as the footman supported Mrs. Sprowl to her feet, "but I've promised the Wycherlys. Pray

offer my compliments and friendly wishes to Mrs. Ledwith."

When she had gone he walked back into the library, picked up the telephone and finally got Molly Wycherly on the wire.

"Won't you ask me to dinner?" he said. "I've an explanation to make to Mrs. Leeds and I'd be awfully obliged to you."

There was a silence, then Molly said, deliberately:

"You must be a very absent-minded young man. I saw your aunt for a moment this afternoon and she said that you are dining with her at Mrs. Ledwith's."

"She was mistaken—" began Sprowl quietly, but Molly cut him short with a laughing "good-bye," and hung up the receiver.

"That was Langly," she remarked, turning to Strelsa who was already dressed for dinner and who had come into Molly's boudoir to observe the hair-dressing and comprehensive embellishment of that young matron's person by a new maid on probation.

Strelsa's upper lip curled faintly, then the happy expression returned, and she watched the decorating of Molly until the maid turned her out in the perfection of grooming from crown to toe.

There was nobody in the music-room. Molly turned again to Strelsa as they entered:

"What a brute he is!—asking me to invite him here for dinner when Mary Ledwith has just arrived."

"Did he do that?"

"Yes. And his excuse was that he had an explanation to make you. What a sneaking way of doing it!"

Strelsa looked out of the dark window in silence.

Molly said: "I wish he'd go away. I never can

look at him without thinking of Chester Ledwith—and all that wretched affair. . . . Not that I am sniffy about Mary—the poor little fool. . . . Anyway," she added naïvely, "old lady Sprowl has fixed her status and now we all know how to behave toward her."

Strelsa, arms clasped behind her back, came slowly forward from the window:

"What a sorry civilisation," she said thoughtfully, "and what sorry codes we frame to govern it."

"What?" sharply.

Strelsa looked at her, absently.

"Nobody seems to be ashamed of anything any more," she said, half to herself. "The only thing that embarrasses us is what the outside world may think of us. We don't seem to care what we think of each other."

Molly, a trifle red, asked her warmly what she meant.

"Oh, I was just realising what are the motives that govern us—the majority of us—and how primitive they are. So many among us seem to be moral throwbacks—types reappearing out of the mists of an ancient and unmoral past. . . . Echoes of primitive ages when nobody knew any better—when life was new, and was merely life and nothing else—fighting, treacherous, cringing life which knew of nothing else to do except to eat, sleep, and reproduce itself—bully the weaker, fawn on the stronger, lie, steal, and watch out that death should not interfere with the main chance."

Molly, redder than ever, asked her again what she meant.

"I don't know, dear. . . . How clean the woods and fields seem after a day indoors with many people."

"You mean we all need moral baths?"

"I do."

Molly smiled: "For a moment I thought you meant that I do."

Strelsa smiled, too:

"You're a good wife, Molly; and a good friend. . . . I wish you had a baby."

"I'm—going to."

They looked at each other a moment; then Strelsa caught her in her arms.

"Really?"

Molly nodded:

"That's why I worry about Jim taking chances in his aeroplane."

"He mustn't! He's got to stop! What can he be thinking of!" cried Strelsa indignantly.

"But he—doesn't know."

"You haven't *told* him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I—don't know how he'll take it."

"What?"

Molly flushed: "We didn't want one. I don't know what he'll say. We didn't care for them——"

Strelsa's angry beauty checked her with its silent scorn; suddenly her pretty head fell forward on Strelsa's breast:

"Don't look that way at me! I was a fool. How was I to know—anything? I'd never had one. . . . You can't know whether you want a baby or not until you have one. . . . I know now. I'm crazy about it. . . . I think it would—would kill me if Jim is annoyed——"

"He won't be, darling!" whispered Strelsa. "Don't mind what he says anyway. He's only a man. He never even knew as much about it as you did. What do men know, anyway? Jim is a dear—just the regular sort of man interested in business and sport and probably afraid that a baby might interfere with both. What does he know about it? . . . Besides he's too decent to be annoyed——"

"I'm afraid—I can't stand—even his indifference—" whimpered Molly.

Strelsa, holding her clasped to her breast, started to speak, but a noise of men in the outer hall silenced her—the aviators returning from their hangars and gathering in the billiard-room for a long one before dressing.

"Wait," whispered Strelsa, gently disengaging herself—"wait just a moment——"

And she was out in the hall in an instant, just in time to touch Jim on the arm as he closed the file toward the billiard-room.

"Hello, Sweetness!" he said, pivoting on his heels and seizing her hands. "Are you coming in to try a cocktail with us?"

"Jim," she said, "I want to tell you something."

"Shoot," he said. "And if you don't hurry I'll kiss you."

"Listen, please. Molly is in the music-room. *Make* her tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Ask her, Jim. . . . And, if you care one atom for her—be happy at what she tells you—and tell her that you are. Will you?"

He stared at her, then lost countenance. Then he

looked at her in a panicky way and started to go, but she held on to him with determination:

"Smile first!"

"Thunder! I——"

"Smile. Oh, Jim, isn't there any decency in men?"

His mind was working like mad; he stared at her, then through the astonishment and consternation on his good-looking features a faint grin broke out.

"All right," she whispered, and let him go.

Molly, idling at the piano, heard his tread behind her, and looked up over her shoulder.

"Hello, Jim," she said, faintly.

"Hello, ducky. Strelsa says you have something to tell me."

"I—Jim?"

"So she said. So I cut out a long one to find out what it is. What's up, ducky?"

Molly's gaze grew keener: "Did that child tell you?"

"She said that you had something to tell me."

"*Did* she?"

"No! Aren't you going to tell me either?"

He dropped into a chair opposite her; she sat on the piano-stool considering him for a while in silence. Then, dropping her arms with a helpless little gesture:

"We are going to have a baby. Are you—annoyed?"

For a second he sat as though paralysed, and the next second he had her in his arms, the grin breaking out from utter blankness.

"You're a corker, ducky!" he whispered. "You for me all the time!"

"Jim! . . . Really?"

"Surest thing you know! Which is it?—boy or—Oh, I beg your pardon, dear—I'm not accustomed to the etiquette. But I'm delighted, ducky, overwhelmed!"

"Oh, Jim! I'm so glad. And I'm crazy about it—perfectly mad about it. . . . And you're a dear to care——"

"Certainly I care! What do you take me for—a wooden Indian!" he exclaimed virtuously. "Come on and we'll celebrate——"

"But, Jim! We can't *tell* people."

"Oh—that's the christening. I forgot, ducky. No, we can't talk about it of course. But I'll do anything you say——"

"Will you?"

"Will I? Watch me!"

"Then—then *don't* take out the Stinger for a while. Do you mind, dear?"

"What!" he said, jaw dropping.

"I can't bear it, Jim. I was a good sport before; you know I was. But my nerve has gone. I can't take chances now; I *want* you to see—it——"

After a moment he nodded.

"Sure," he said. "It's like Lent. You've got to offer up something. . . . If you feel that way—" he sighed unconsciously—"I'll lock up the hangar until——"

"Oh, darling! Will you?"

"Yes," said that desolate young man, and kissed his wife without a scowl. He had behaved pretty well—about like the majority of husbands outside of popular romances.

The amateur aeronauts left in the morning before anybody was stirring except the servants—Vincent Wier, Lester Caldera, the Van Dynes and the rest, bag, baggage, and, later, two aeroplanes packed and destined for Barent Van Dyne's Long Island estate where there was to be some serious flying attempted over the flat and dusty plains of that salubrious island.

Sir Charles Mallison was leaving that same day, later; and there were to be no more of Jim's noisy parties; and now under the circumstances, no parties of Molly's, either; because Molly was becoming nervous and despondent and a mania for her husband possessed her—the pretty resurgence of earlier sentiment which, if not more than comfortably dormant, buds charmingly again at a time like this.

Also she wanted Strelsa, and nobody beside these two; and although she liked parties of all sorts including Jim's sporting ones, and although she liked Sir Charles immensely, she was looking forward to comfort of an empty house with only her husband to decorate the landscape and Strelsa to whisper to in morbid moments.

For Chrysos was going to Newport, Sir Charles and her maid accompanying her as far as New York from where the Baronet meant to sail the next day.

His luggage had already gone; his man was packing when Sir Charles sauntered out over the dew-wet lawn, a sprig of sweet-william in his lapel, tall, clear-skinned, nice to look upon.

What he really thought of what he had seen in America, of the sort of people who had entertained him, of the grotesque imitation of exotic society—or of a certain sort of it—nobody really knew. Doubtless his

estimate was inclined to be a kindly one, for he was essentially that—a philosophical, chivalrous, and modest man; and if his lines had fallen in places where vulgarity, extravagance, and ostentation predominated —if he had encountered little real cultivation, less erudition, and almost nothing worthy of sympathetic interest, he never betrayed either impatience or contempt.

He had come for one reason only—the same reason that had brought him to America for the first time—to ask Strelsa Leeds to marry him.

He was man enough to understand that she did not care for him that way, soldier enough to face his fate, keen enough, long since, to understand that Quarren meant more to the woman he cared for than any other man.

Cool, self-controlled, he watched every chance for an opening in his own behalf. No good chance presented itself. So he made one and offered himself with a dignity and simplicity that won Strelsa's esteem but not her heart.

After that he stayed on, not hoping, but merely because he liked her. Later he remained because of a vague instinct that he might as well be on hand while Strelsa went through the phase with Langly Sprowl. But he was a wise man, and weeks ago he had seen the inevitable outcome. Also he had divined Quarren's influence in the atmosphere, had watched for it, sensed it, seen it very gradually materialise in a score of acts and words of which Strelsa herself was totally unconscious.

Then, too, the afternoon before, he had encountered Sprowl riding furiously with reeking spurs, after his morning's gallop with Strelsa; and he had caught a glimpse of the man's face; and that was enough.

So there was really nothing to keep him in America any longer. He wanted to get back to his own kind—into real life again, among people of real position and real elegance, where live topics were discussed, where live things were attempted or accomplished, where whatever was done, material or immaterial, was done thoroughly and well.

There was not one thing in America, now, to keep him there—except a warm and kindly affection for his little friend Chrysos Lacy with whom he had been thrown so constantly at Witch-Hollow.

Strolling across the lawn, he thought of her with warm gratitude. In her fresh and unspoiled youth he had found relief from a love unreturned, a cool, sweet antidote to passion, a balm for loneliness most exquisite and delightful.

The very perfection of comradeship it had been, full of charming surprises as well as a rest both mental and physical. For Chrysos made few demands on his intellect—that is, at first she had made very few. Later—within the past few weeks, he remembered now his surprise to find how much there really was to the young girl—and that perhaps her age and inexperience alone marked any particular intellectual chasm between them.

Thinking of these things he sauntered on across country, and after a while came to the grounds of the Ledwith place, wondering a little that a note from Mrs. Sprowl the evening before should have requested him to present himself at so early an hour.

A man took his card, returned presently saying that Mrs. Ledwith had not yet risen, but that Mrs. Sprowl would receive him.

Conducted to the old lady's apartments he was ushered into a dressing-room done in pastel tints, and which hideously set forth the colouring and proportions of Mrs. Sprowl in lace bed-attire, bolstered up in a big cane-backed chair.

"I'm ill," she said hoarsely; "I have been ill all night—sitting here because I can't lie down. I'd strangle if I lay down."

He held her hand in his firm, sun-tanned grasp, looking down compassionately:

"Awf'lly sorry," he said as though he meant it.

The old lady peered up at him:

"You're sailing to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," he said, gravely.

"When do you return?"

"I have made no plans to return."

"You mean to say that you've given up the fight?"

"There was never any fight," he said.

Mrs. Sprowl scowled:

"Has that heartless girl refused you again, Sir Charles?"

"Dear Mrs. Sprowl, you are too much my partisan. Mrs. Leeds knows better than you or I where her heart is really inclined. And you and I can scarcely question her decision."

"Do you think for a moment it is inclined toward that miserable nephew of mine?" she demanded.

"No," he said.

"Then—do you mean young Quarren?"

"I think I do," he said smiling.

"I'm glad of it!" she said angrily. "If it was not to be you I'm glad that it may be Rix. It—it would have killed me to see her fall into Langly's hands. . . .

I'm ill on account of him—his shocking treatment of me last evening. It was a brutal scene—one of those terrible family scenes!—and he threatened me—cursed me——"

She closed her eyes a moment, trembling all over her fat body; then they snapped open again with the old fire undiminished:

"Before I've finished with Langly he'll realise who has hold of him. . . . But I'm not well. I'm going to Carlsbad. Shall I see you there?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You are going back into everything, I suppose."

"Yes."

"To forget her, I suppose."

He said pleasantly:

"I do not wish to forget her. One prefers to think often of such a woman as Mrs. Leeds. There are not many like her. It is something of a privilege to have cared for her, and the memory is not—painful."

Mrs. Sprowl glared at him; and, as she thought of Langly, of Strelsa, of the collapse of her own schemes, the baffled rage began to smoulder in her tiny green eyes till they dwindled and dwindled to a pair of phosphorescent sparks imbedded in fat.

"I did my best," she said hoarsely. "I'm not defeated if you're not. Say the word and I'll start something—" And suddenly she remembered Langly's threat involving the memory of a dead man whose only son now stood before her.

She knew that her words were vain, her boast empty; she knew there was nothing more for her to do—nothing even that Sir Charles might do toward winning Strelsa without also doing the only thing in the world

which could really terrify herself. Even at the mere thought of it she trembled again, and fear forced her to speech born of fear:

"Perhaps it is best for you to go," she faltered. "Absence is a last resort. . . . It may be well to try it——"

He bent over and took her hand:

"There is no longer even a last resort," he said kindly. "I am quite reconciled. She is different from any other woman; ours was and is a high type of friendship. . . . Sometimes, lately, I have wondered whether it ever could have been any more than that to either of us."

Mrs. Sprowl looked up at him, her face so altered and softened that his own grew graver.

"You are like your father," she said unsteadily. "It was my privilege to share his friendship. . . . And his friendship was of that kind—high-minded, generous, pure—asking no more than it gave—no more than it gave——"

She laid her cheek against Sir Charles's hands, let it rest there an instant, then averting her face motioned his dismissal.

He went with a pleasant and gentle word or two; she sat bolt upright among her silken pillows, lips grimly compressed, but on her tightly closed eyelids tears trembled.

Sir Charles drew a long deep breath in the outer sunshine, filling his lungs with the fragrant morning air. Hedges still glistened with spiders' tapestry; the birds which sulked all day in their early moulting-fever still sang a little in the cool of the morning, and he listened to them as he walked while his quiet, impartial

eye ranged over the lovely rolling country, dew-washed and exquisite under a cloudless sky.

Far away he saw the chimneys of Langly Sprowl's sprawling country-seat, smoke rising from two, but he saw nothing of the angry horseman of the day before. Once, in the distance on the edge of a copse, he saw a man creeping about on all-fours, evidently searching for some lost object in the thicket. Looking back from a long way off he saw him still searching on his hands and knees, and wondered at his patience, half inclined to go back and aid him.

But about that time one of Sprowl's young bulls came walking over toward him with such menacing observations and deportment that Sir Charles promptly looked about him for an advance to the rear-front—a manœuvre he had been obliged to learn in the late Transvaal unpleasantness.

And at the same moment he saw Chrysos Lacy.

There was no time for explanations; clearly she was too frightened to stir; so he quietly picked her up on his advance to the rear-front, carrying her in the first-aid style approved by the H. B. M. medical staff, and scaled the five-bar fence as no barrier had ever been scaled at Aldershot or Olympia by any warrior in khaki or scarlet tunic.

"Th-thank you," said Chrysos, unwinding her arms from the baronet's neck as the bull came trotting up on the other side of the fence and bellowed at them. Not the slightest atom of fright remained, only a wild-rose tint in her cheeks. She considered the bull, absently, patted a tendril of hair into symmetry; but the breeze loosened it again, and she let it blow across her cheek.

"We should have been in South Africa together,"

"'And it is to be

your last breakfast.'"

said Sir Charles. "We manœuvre beautifully as a unit."

The girl laughed, then spying more wild strawberries—the quest of which had beguiled her into hostile territory—dropped on her knees and began to explore.

The berries were big and ripe—huge drops of crimson honey hanging heavily, five to a stalk. The meadow-grass was red with them, and Sir Charles, without more ado, got down on all-fours and started to gather them with all the serious and thorough determination characteristic of that warrior.

"You're not to eat any, yet," said Chrysos.

"Of course not; they're for your breakfast I take it," he said.

"For yours."

He straightened up on his knees: "For mine?"

"Certainly."

"You didn't go wandering afield at this hour to pick wild strawberries for *my* breakfast!" he said incredulously.

"Yes, I did," said the girl; and continued exploring, parting the high grass-stems to feel for and detach some berry-loaded stem.

"Do you know," he said, returning to his labours, "that I am quite overcome by your thought of me?"

"Why? We are friends. . . . And it is to be your last breakfast."

There was not the slightest tremor in her voice, but her pretty face was carefully turned away so that if there was to be anything to notice in the features he could not notice it.

"I'll miss you a lot," he said.

"And I you, Sir Charles."

"You'll be over, I suppose."

"I suppose so."

"That will be jolly," he said, sitting back on his heels to rest, and to watch her—to find pleasure in her youth and beauty as she moved gracefully amid the fragrant grasses, one little sun-tanned hand clasping a great bouquet of the crimson fruit which nodded heavily amid tufts of trefoil leaves.

In the barred shadow of the pasture-fence they rested from their exertions, she rearranging their bouquets of berries and tying them fast with grass-stems.

"It has been a pleasant comradeship," he said.

"Yes."

"You have found it so, too?"

"Yes."

She appeared to be so intent, so absorbed on her bouquet tying that he involuntarily leaned nearer to watch her. A fragrance faintly fresh seemed to grow in the air around him as the hill-breeze stirred her hair. If it came from the waving grass-tops, or the honeyed fruit or from her hair, or perhaps from those small, smooth hands, he did not know.

For a long while they sat there without speaking, she steadily intent on her tying. Then, while still busy with a cluster, her slim fingers hesitated, wavered, relaxed; her hands fell to her lap, and she remained so, head bent, motionless.

After a moment he spoke, but she made no answer.

Through and through him shot the thrilling comprehension of that exquisite avowal, childlike in its silent directness, charming in its surprise. A wave of tenderness and awe mounted within him, touching his bronzed cheeks with a deeper colour.

"If you will, Chrysos," he said in a still voice.

She lifted her head and looked directly at him, and in her questioning gaze there was nothing of fear—merely the question.

"I can't bear to have you go," she said.

"I can't go—alone."

"Could you—care for me?"

"I love you, Chrysos."

Her eyes widened in wonder:

"You—you don't *love* me—do you?"

"Yes," he said, "I do. Will you marry me, Chrysos?"

Her fascinated gaze met his in silence. He drew her close to his shoulder; she laid her cheek against it.

CHAPTER XV

Toward the end of the first week in August Strelsa wrote to Quarren:

"Sometimes I wonder whether you realise how my attitude toward everything is altering. Things which seemed important no longer appear so in the sunlit tranquillity of this lovely place. Whatever it is that seems to be changing me in various ways is doing it so subtly, yet so inexorably, that I scarcely notice any difference in myself until some morning I awake with such a delicious sense of physical well-being and such a mental happiness apropos of nothing at all except the mere awaking into the world again, that, thinking it over, I cannot logically account for it.

"Because, Rix, my worldly affairs seem to be going from bad to worse. I know it perfectly well, yet where is that deadly fear?—where is the dismay, the alternate hours of panic and dull lethargy—the shrinking from a future which only yesterday seemed to threaten me with more than I had strength to endure—menace me with what I had neither the will nor the desire to resist?

"Gone, my friend! And I am either a fool or a philosopher, but whichever I am, I am a happy one.

"I wish to tell you something. Last winter when they fished me out of my morbid seclusion, I thought that the life I then entered upon was the only panacea

for the past, the only oblivion, the only guarantee for the future.

"Now I suppose I have gone to the other extreme, because, let me tell you what I've done. Will you laugh? I can't help it if you do; I've bought a house! What do you think of that?

"The owner took back a mortgage, but I don't care. I paid so *very* little for it, and thirty acres of woods and fields—and it is a darling house!—built in the eighteenth century and not in good repair, but it's mine! mine! mine!—and it may need paint and plumbing and all sorts of things which perhaps make for human happiness and perhaps do not. But I tell you I really don't care.

"And how I did it was this: I took what they offered for my laces and jewels—about a third of their value—but it paid every debt and left me with enough to buy my sweet old house up here.

"But that's not all! I've rented my town house furnished for a term of five years at seven thousand dollars a year! Isn't it wonderful?

"And *that* is not all, either. I am going into business, Rix! Don't dare laugh. Jim has made an arrangement with an independent New York florist, and I'm going to grow flowers under glass for the Metropolitan market.

"And, if I succeed, I *may* try fruits outdoors and in. My small brain is humming with schemes, millions of them. Isn't it heavenly?

"Besides, from my second-story windows I shall be able to see Molly's chimneys above the elms. And Molly is going to remain here all winter, because, Rix—and this is a close secret—a little heir or heiress is

coming to make *this* House of Wycherly 'an habitation enforced'—and a happier habitation than it has been since they bought it.

"So you see I shall have neighbours all winter—two neighbours, for Mrs. Ledwith is wretchedly ill and her physicians have advised her to remain here all winter. Poor child—for she is nothing else, Rix—I met her for the first time when I went to call on Mrs. Sprowl. She's so young and so empty-headed, just a shallow, hare-brained, little thing who had no more moral idea of sin than a humming-bird—nor perhaps has she any now except that the world has hurt her and broken her wings and damaged her plumage; and the sunlight in which she sparkled for a summer has faded to a chill gray twilight!—Oh, Rix, it is really pitiful; and somehow I can't seem to remember whether she was guilty or not, because she's so ill, so broken—lying here amid the splendour of her huge house——

"You know Mrs. Sprowl is on her way to Carlsbad. You haven't written me what took place in your last interview with her; and I've asked you, twice. Won't you tell me?

"Langly, thank goodness, never disturbs us. And, Rix, do you know that he has never been to call on Mary Ledwith? He keeps to his own estate and nobody even sees him. Which is all I ask at any rate.

"So Sir Charles called on you and told you about Chrysos? Isn't Sir Charles the most darling man you ever knew? *I* never knew such a man. There is not one atom of anything small or unworthy in his character. And I tell you very frankly that, thinking about him at times, I am amazed at myself for not falling in love with him.

Strelsa Leeds.

"Which is proof sufficient that if I couldn't care for him I cannot ever care for any man. Don't you think so?

"Now all this letter has been devoted to matters concerning myself and not one line to you and the exciting success you and Lord Dankmere are making of your new business.

"Oh, Rix, I am not indifferent; all the time I have been writing to you, that has been surging and laughing in my heart—like some delicious aria that charmingly occupies your mind while you go happily about other matters—happy because the ceaseless melody that enchants you makes you so.

"I have read your letter so many times, over and over; and always the same thrill of excitement begins when I come to the part where you begin to suspect that under the daubed surface of that canvas there may be something worth while.

"Is it really and truly a Van Dyck? Is there any chance that it is not? Is it possible that all these years none of Dankmere's people suspected what was hidden under the aged paint and varnish of that tiresome old British landscape?

"And it remained for you to suspect it!—for *you* to discover it? Oh, Rix, I am proud of you!

"And how perfectly wonderful it is that now you know its history, when it was supposed to have disappeared, where it has remained ever since under its ignoble integument of foolish paint.

"No, I promise not to say one word about it until I have your permission. I understand quite well why you desire to keep the matter from the newspapers for the present. But—won't it make you and Lord Dank-

mere rich? Tell me—please tell me. I don't want money for myself any more, but I *do* want it for you. You need it; you can do so much with it, use it so intelligently, so gloriously, make the world better with it, —make it more beautiful, and people happier.

"What a chasm, Rix, between what we were a year ago, and what we care to be—what we are trying to be to-day! Sometimes I think of it, not unhappily, merely wondering.

"Toward what goal were we moving a year ago? What was there to be of such lives?—what at the end? Why, there was, for us, no more significance in living than there is to any overfed animal!—not as much!

"Oh, this glorious country of high clouds and far horizons!—and alas! for the Streets of Ascalon where such as I once was go to and fro—'clad delicately in scarlet and ornaments of gold.'

"'Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the Streets of Ascalon'—that the pavements of the Philistines have bruised my feet, and their Five Cities weary me, and Philistia's high towers are become a burden to my soul. For their gods are too many and too strange for me. So I am decided to remain here—ere 'they that look out of their windows be darkened' and 'the doors be shut in the Streets'—'and all the daughters of music shall be brought low.'

"My poor comrade! Must you remain a prisoner in the Streets of Ascalon? Yet, through your soul I know as free and fresh a breeze is blowing as stirs the curtains at my open window!— You wonderful man to evoke in imagery—to visualise and conceive all that

had to be concrete to cure me soul and body of my hurts!

"I have been reading Karl Westguard's new novel. Rix, there is no story in it, nothing at all that I can discover except a very earnest warming over of several modern philosophers' views and conclusions concerning social problems.

"I hate to speak unkindly of it; I wanted to like it because I like Karl Westguard. But it isn't fiction and it isn't philosophy, and its treatment of social problems seems to follow methods already obsolete.

"Do you think people will buy it? But I don't suppose Karl cares since he's made up his quarrel with his aunt.

"Poor old lady! Did you ever see anybody so subdued and forlorn? Something has gone wrong with her. She told me that she had had a most dreadful scene with Langly and that she had not been well since.

"I'm afraid that sounds like gossip, but I wanted you to know. *Is* it gossip for me to tell you so much? I tell you about everything. If it's gossip, make me stop.

"And now—when are you coming to see me? I am still at Molly's, you know. My house is being cleaned and sweetened and papered and chintzed and made livable and lovable.

"When?—please.

"Your friend and comrade,

"STRELSA."

Quarren telegraphed:

"I'll come the moment I can. Look for me any day this week. Letter follows."

Then he wrote her a long letter, and was still at it when Jessie Vining went to lunch and when Dankmere got onto his little legs and strolled out, also. There was no need to arouse anybody's suspicions by hurrying, so Dankmere waited until he turned the corner before his little legs began to trot. Miss Vining would be at her usual table, anyway—and probably as calmly surprised to see him as she always was. For the repeated accident of their encountering at the same restaurant seemed to furnish an endless source of astonishment to them both. Apparently Jessie Vining could never understand it, and to him it appeared to be a coincidence utterly unfathomable.

Meanwhile Quarren had mailed his letter to Strelsa and had returned to his workshop in the basement where several canvases awaited his attention.

And it was while he was particularly busy that the front door-bell rang and he had to go up and open.

At first he did not recognise the figure standing on the steps in the glare of the sun; then, surprised, he held out his rather grimy hand with that instinct of kindness toward anything that seemed to need it; and the thin pallid hand of Ledwith fell limply into his, contracting nervously the next second.

"Come in," said Quarren, pleasantly. "It's very nice of you to think of me, Ledwith."

The man's hollow eyes avoided his and roamed restlessly about the gallery, looking at picture after picture and scarcely seeing them. Inside his loose summer

clothing his thin, nervous frame was shifting continually even while he stood gazing almost vacantly at the walls of the gallery.

For a little while Quarren endeavoured to interest him in the canvases, meaning only charity to a man who had clearly lost his grip on things; then, afraid of bewildering and distressing a mind so nearly extinct, the young fellow remained silent, merely accompanying Ledwith as he moved purposelessly hither and thither or halted capriciously, staring into space and twitching his scarred fingers.

"You're busy, I suppose," he said.

"Yes, I am," said Quarren, frankly. "But that needn't make any difference if you'd care to come to the basement and talk to me while I'm at work."

Ledwith made no reply for a moment, then, abruptly:

"You're *always* kind to me, Quarren."

"Get over that idea," laughed the younger man. "Strange as it may seem my natural inclination is to like people. Come on downstairs."

In the littered disorder of the basement he found a chair for his visitor, then, without further excuse, went smilingly about his work, explaining it as it progressed:

"Here's an old picture by some Italian gink—impossible to tell by whom it was painted, but not difficult to assign it to a certain date and school. . . . See what I'm doing, Ledwith?

"That's what we call 'rabbit glue' because it's made out of rabbits' bones—or that's the belief, anyway. It's gilder's glue.

"Now I dissolve this much of it in hot water—then I glue over the face of the picture three layers of tissue-paper, one on top of the other—so!

"Now here is a new chassis or stretcher over which I have stretched a new linen canvas. Yesterday I sponged it as a tailor sponges cloth; and now it's dry and tight.

"Now I'm going to reline this battered old Italian canvas. It's already been relined—perhaps a hundred years ago. So first I take off the old relining canvas —with hot water—this way—cleaning off all the old paste or glue from it with alcohol. . . .

"Now here's a pot of paste in which there is also glue and whitening; and I spread it over the back of this old painting, and then, very gingerly, glue it over the new linen canvas on the stretcher.

"Now I smooth it with this polished wooden block, and then—just watch me do laundry work!"

He picked up a flat-iron which was moderately warm, reversed the relined picture on a marble slab, and began to iron it out with the skill and precaution of an expert laundress doing frills.

Ledwith looked on with a sort of tremulously fixed interest.

"In three days," said Quarren, laying the plastered picture away, "I'll soak off that tissue paper with warm water. I have to keep it on, you see, so that no flakes of paint shall escape from the painting and no air get in to blister the surface."

He picked up another picture and displayed it:

"Here's a picture that I believe to be a study by Greuze. You see I have already relined it and it's fixed on its new canvas and stretcher and is thoroughly dry and ready for cleaning. And this is how I begin."

He took a fine sponge, soaked it in a weak solution

of alcohol, and very gingerly washed the blackened and dirty canvas. Then he dried it. Then he gave it a coat of varnish.

"Looks foolish to varnish over a filthy and discoloured picture like this, doesn't it, Ledwith? But I'll tell you why. When that varnish dries hard I shall place my hand on the face of that canvas and begin very cautiously but steadily to rub the varnished surface with my fingers and thumb. And do you know what will happen? The new varnish has partly united with the old yellow and opaque coating of varnish and dust, and it all will turn to a fine gray powder under the friction and will come away leaving the old paint underneath almost as fresh—very often quite as fresh and delicate as when the picture was first painted.

"Sometimes I have to use three or more coats of new varnish before I can remove the old without endangering the delicate glaze underneath. But sooner or later I get it clean.

"Then I dig out any old patches or restorations and fill in with a composition of putty, white lead, and a drier, and smooth this with a cork. Then when it is sunned for an hour a day for three weeks or more—or less, sometimes—I'm ready to grind my pure colours, mix them, set my palette, and do as honest a piece of restoring as a study of that particular master's methods permits. And that, Ledwith, is only a little part of my fascinating profession.

"Sometimes I lift the entire skin of paint from a canvas—picking out the ancient threads from the rotten texture—and transfer it to a new canvas or panel. Sometimes I cross-saw a panel, then chisel to the plaster that lies beneath the painting, and so transfer it to a

new and sound support. Sometimes—" he laughed—"but there are a hundred delicate and interesting surgical operations which I attempt—a thousand exciting problems to solve—experiments without end that tempt me, innovations that allure me——"

He laughed again:

"*You* ought to take up some fad and make a business and even an art out of it!"

"I?" said Ledwith, dully.

"Why not? Man, you're young yet, if—if——"

"Yes, I know, Quarren. . . . But my mind is too old—very old and very infirm—dying in me of age—the age that comes through those centuries of pain that men sometimes live through in a few months."

Quarren looked at him hopelessly.

"Yet," he said, "if only a man wills it, the world is new again."

"But—if the will fails?"

"I don't know, Ledwith."

"I do." He drew up his cuff a little way, his dead eyes resting on Quarren, then, in silence, he drew the sleeve over the scars.

"Even that can be cured," said the younger man.

"If there is a will to cure it, perhaps."

"Even a desire is enough."

"I have not that desire. Why cure it?"

"Because, Ledwith, you haven't gone your limit yet. There's more of life; and you're cheating yourself out of it."

"Yes, perhaps. But what kind of life?" he asked, staring vaguely out into the sunshine of the backyard. "Life in hell has no attractions for me."

"We make our own hells."

"I didn't make mine. They dug the pit and I fell into it— Hell's own pit, Quarren——"

"You are wrong! You fell into a pit which hurt so much that you supposed it was the pit of hell. And, taking it for granted, you burrowed deeper in blind fury, until it became a real hell. But *you* dug it. There *is* no hell that a man does not dig for himself!"

In Ledwith's dull eyes a smouldering spark seemed to flash, go out, then glimmer palely.

"Quarren," he said, "I am not going to live in hell alone. I'm going there, shortly, but not alone."

Something new and sinister in his eyes arrested the other's attention. He considered the man for a few moments, then, coolly:

"I wouldn't, Ledwith."

"Why not?"

"He isn't worth it—even as company in hell."

"Do you think I'm going to let him live on?"

"Do you care to sink to his level?"

"Sink! Can I sink any lower than I am?"

Quarren shrugged:

"Easily, if you commit murder."

"That isn't murder——"

But Quarren cut him short continuing:

"Sink lower, you ask? What have you done, anyway—except to commit this crime against yourself?" —touching him on the wrist. "I'm not aware of any other crime committed by you, Ledwith. You're clean as you stand—except for this damnable insult and injury you offer yourself! Can't you reason? A bullet-stung animal sometimes turns and bites itself. Is that why you are doing it?—to arouse the amusement and contempt of your hunter?"

"Quarren! By God you shall not say that to me——"

"Why not? Have you ever considered what that man must think of you to see you turn and tear at the body he has crippled?"

Ledwith's sunken eyes blazed; he straightened himself, took one menacing step forward; and Quarren laid a light, steady hand on his shoulder.

"Listen to me," he said; "has it never occurred to you that you could deal him no deeper blow than to let him see a man stand up to him, face to face, where a creature lay writhing before, biting into its own vitals?"

He smiled into the fixed eyes of the almost mindless man:

"If you say the word *I'll* stand by you, Ledwith. If all you want to do is to punish him, murder isn't the way. What does a dead man care? Cut your own throat and the crime might haunt him—and might not. But *kill!*—Nonsense. It's all over then—except for the murderer."

He slid his hand quietly to Ledwith's arm, patted it.

"To punish him you need a doctor. . . . It's only a week under the new treatment. You know that, don't you? After that a few months to get back nerve and muscle and common sense."

"And then?" motioned Ledwith with dry lips.

"Then? Oh, anything that you fancy. It's according to a man's personal taste. You can take him by the neck and beat him up in public if you like—or knock him down in the club as often as he gets up. It all depends, Ledwith. Some of us maintain self-respect

without violence; some of us seem to require it. It's up to you."

"Yes."

Quarren said carelessly: "If I were you, I think that I'd face the world as soon as I was physically and mentally well enough—the real world I mean, Ledwith—either here or abroad, just as I felt about it.

"A man can get over anything except the stigma of dishonesty. And—personally I think he ought to have another chance even after that. But men's ideas differ. As for you, what you become and show that you are, will go ultimately with the world. Beat him up if you like; but, personally, I never even wished to kick a cur. Some men kick 'em to their satisfaction: it's a matter of taste I tell you. Besides——"

He stopped short; and presently Ledwith looked up.

"Shall I say it?"

"Yes. You are kind to me, always."

"Then—Ledwith, I don't know exactly how matters stand. I can only try to put myself in your present place and imagine what I ought to do, having arrived where you have landed. . . . And, do you know, if I were you, and if I listened to my better self, I don't think that I'd lay a finger on Langly Sprowl."

"Why?"

"For the sake of the woman who betrayed me—and who is now betrayed in turn by the man who betrayed us both."

Ledwith said through his set teeth: "Do you think I care for her? If I nearly kill him, do you imagine I care what the public will say about her?"

"You are generous enough to care, Ledwith."

"I am not!" he said, hoarsely. "I don't care a damn!"

"Then why do you care whether or not he keeps his word to her and shares with her a coat of social whitewash?"

"I—she is only a little fool—alone to face the world now——"

"You're quite right, Ledwith. She ought to have another chance. First offenders are given it by law. . . . But even if that chance lay in his marrying her, could you better it by killing him if he won't do it? Or by battering him with a dog-whip?

"It isn't really much of a chance, considering it on a higher level than the social view-point. How much real rehabilitation is there for a woman who marries such a man?"

He smiled: "Because," he continued, "my viewpoint has changed. Things that once seemed important to me seem so no longer. To live cleanly and do your best in the real world is an aspiration more attractive to me than social absolution."

Ledwith remained silent for a long while, then muttered something indistinctly.

"Wait a moment," said Quarren, throwing aside his painter's blouse and pulling on his coat. "I'll ring up a taxi in a second! . . . You *mean* it, Ledwith?"

The man looked at him vacantly, then nodded.

"You're on!" said Quarren, briskly unhooking the telephone.

While they were waiting Ledwith laid a shaking hand on Quarren's sleeve and clung to it. He was trembling like a leaf when they entered the cab, whimpering when they left it in front of a wide brown-stone

building composed of several old-time private residences thrown together.

"Stand by me, Quarren," he whispered brokenly—"you won't go away, will you? You wouldn't leave me to face this all—all alone. You've been kind to me. I—I can do it—I can try to do it just at this moment—if you'll stay close to me—if you'll let me keep hold of you——"

"Sure thing!" said Quarren cheerfully. "I'll stay as long as you like. Don't worry about your clothes; I'll send for plenty of linen and things for us both. You're all right, Ledwith—you've got the nerve. I——"

The door opened to his ring; a pleasant-faced nurse in white ushered them in.

"Dr. Lydon will see you in a moment," she said, singling out Ledwith at a glance.

Later that afternoon Quarren telephoned to Dankmere that he would not return for a day or two, and gave careful instructions which Dankmere promised to observe to the letter.

Then he sent a telegram to Strelsa:

"Unavoidably detained in town. Hope to be up next week. Am crazy to see your house and its new owner. R. S. Q."

Dankmere at the other end of the telephone hung up the receiver, looked carefully around him to be certain that Jessie Vining was still in the basement where she had gone to straighten up one or two things for Quarren, then, with a perfectly serious face, he began to dance, softly.

The Earl of Dankmere was light-footed and graceful

when paying tribute to Terpsichore; walking-stick balanced in both hands, straw hat on the back of his head, he performed in absolute silence to the rhythm of the tune running through his head, backward, forward, sideways, airy as a ballet-maiden, then off he went into the back room with a refined kick or two at the ceiling.

And there, Jessie Vining, entering the front room unexpectedly, discovered the peer executing his art before the mirror, apparently enamoured of his own grace and agility.

When he caught a glimpse of her in the mirror he stopped very suddenly and came back to find her at her desk, laughing.

For a moment he remained red and disconcerted, but the memory of the fact that he and Miss Vining were to occupy the galleries all alone—exclusive of intrusive customers—for a day or more, assuaged a slight chagrin.

"At any rate," he said, "it is just as well that you should know me as I am, Miss Vining—with all my faults and frivolous imperfections, isn't it?"

"Why?" asked Miss Vining.

"Why—what?" repeated the Earl, confused.

"Why *should* I know all your imperfections?"

He thought hard for a moment, but seemed to discover no valid reason.

"You ask such odd questions," he protested. "Now where the deuce do you suppose Quarren has gone? I'll bet he's cut the traces and gone up to see those people at Witch-Hollow."

"Perhaps," she said, making a few erasures in her type-written folio and rewriting the blank spaces. Then she glanced over the top of the machine at his lordship, who, as it happened, was gazing at her with such pecu-

liar intensity that it took him an appreciable moment to rouse himself and take his eyes elsewhere.

"When do you take your vacation?" he asked, carelessly.

"I am not going to take one."

"Oh, but you ought! You'll go stale, fade, droop—er—and all that, you know!"

"It is very kind of you to feel interested," she said, smiling, "but I don't expect to droop—er—and all that, you know."

He laughed, after a moment, and so did she—a sweet, fearless, little laugh most complimentary to his lordship if he only knew it—a pretty, frank tribute to what had become a friendship—an accord born of confidence on her part, and of several other things on the part of Lord Dankmere.

It had been of slow growth at first—imperceptibly their relations had grown from a footing of distant civility to a companionship almost cordial—but not quite; for she was still shy with him at times, and he with her; and she had her moods of unresponsive reserve, and he was moody, too, at intervals.

"You don't like me to make fun of you, do you?" she asked.

"Don't I laugh as though I like it?"

She knitted her pretty brows: "I don't quite know. You see you're a British peer—which is really a very wonderful thing——"

"Oh, come," he said: "it really *is* rather a wonderful thing, but you don't believe it."

"Yes, I do. I stand in awe of you. When you come into the room I seem to hear trumpets sounding in the far distance——"

"My boots squeak——"

"Nonsense! I *do* hear a sort of a fairy fanfare playing 'Hail to the Belted Earl!'"

"I wear braces——"

"How common of you to distort my meaning! I don't care, you may do as you like—dance break-downs and hammer the piano, but to me you will ever remain a British peer—poor but noble——"

"Wait until we hear from that Van Dyck! You can't call me poor then!"

She laughed, then, looking at him earnestly, involuntarily clasped her hands.

"Isn't it perfectly wonderful," she breathed with a happy, satisfied sigh.

"Are you really very happy about it, Miss Vining?"

"I? Why shouldn't I be!" she said indignantly. "I'm so proud that our gallery has such a picture. I'm so proud of Mr. Quarren for discovering it—and—" she laughed—"I'm proud of you for possessing it. You see I am very impartial; I'm proud of the gallery, of everybody connected with it including myself. Shouldn't I be?"

"We are three very perfect people," he said gravely.

"Do you know that we really are? Mr. Quarren is wonderful, and you are—agreeable, and as for me, why when I rise in the morning and look into the glass I say to myself, 'Who *is* that rather clever-looking girl who smiles at me every morning in such friendly fashion?' And, would you believe it!—she turns out to be Jessie Vining every time!"

She was in a gay mood; she rattled away at her machine, glancing over it mischievously at him from time

to time. He, having nothing to do except to look at her, did so as often as he dared.

And so they kept the light conversational shuttlecock flying through the sunny afternoon until it drew near to tea-time. Jessie said very seriously:

"No Englishman can exist without tea. Tea is as essential to him as it is to British fiction. A microscopic examination of any novel made by a British subject will show traces of tea-leaves and curates although, as the text-books on chemistry have it, otherwise the substance of the work may be colourless, tasteless, odourless, and gaseous to the verge of the fourth dimension——"

"If you don't cease making game of things British and sacred," he threatened, "I'll try to stop you in a way that will astonish you."

"What will you try to do?" she asked, much interested.

He looked her steadily in the eyes:

"I'll try to turn you into a British subject. One can't slam one's own country."

"How could you turn me into such an object, Lord Dankmere?"

"There's only one way."

Innocent for a few moments of his meaning she smilingly and derisively defied him. Then, of a sudden, startled into immobility, the smile froze on her lips.

At the swift change in her expression his own features were slowly and not unbecomingly suffused.

Then, incredulous, and a little nervous, she rose to prepare the tea; and he sprang up to bring the folding table.

The ceremony passed almost in silence; neither he

nor she made the effort to return to the lighter, gayer vein. When they spoke at all it was on some matter connected with business; and her voice seemed to him listless, almost tired.

Which was natural enough, for the heat had been trying, and, in spite of the open windows, no breath of coolness stirred the curtains.

So the last minutes of the afternoon passed but the sunshine still reddened the cornices of the houses across the street when she rose to put away the tea-things.

A little later she pinned on her hat and moved toward the front door with a friendly nod to him in silent adieu.

"Will you let me walk home with you?" he said.

"I—think—not, this evening."

"Were you going anywhere?"

She paused, her gloved hand on the knob, and he came up to her, slowly.

"*Were* you?" he repeated.

"No."

"Then—don't you care to let me walk with you?"

She seemed to be thinking; her head was a trifle lowered.

He said: "Before you go there is something I wanted to tell you"—she made an involuntary movement and the door opened and hung ajar letting in the lively music of a street-organ. Then he leaned over and quietly closed the door.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I'm taking an unwarrantable liberty by interfering in your affairs without consulting you."

She looked up at him, surprised.

"It happened yesterday about this hour," he said.

"What happened?"

"Do you remember that you went home about three o'clock instead of waiting until this hour as usual?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is what occurred. I left the gallery at this same hour. Ahead of me descending the steps was a young girl who had just delivered a business letter to Mr. Quarren. As she set foot on the pavement a footman attached to an automobile drawn up across the street touched his cap to her and said: 'Beg pardon, Miss Vining, I am Mr. Sprowl's man. Mr. Sprowl would like to see you at the Café Cammargue. The car is waiting.'"

Miss Vining's colour faded; she stared at Dankmere with widening eyes, and he dropped his hands into his coat-pockets and returned her gaze.

"I don't understand you," she said in a low voice.

"Neither did the young girl addressed by the footman. Neither did I. But I was interested. So I said to the footman: 'Bring around your car. I shall have to explain about Miss Vining to Mr. Sprowl.'"

"What!" she said breathlessly.

"That's where I interfered, Miss Vining. And the footman looked doubtful, too, but he signalled the chauffeur. . . . And so I went to the Café Cammargue——"

He hesitated, looking at her white and distressed face, then continued coolly:

"Sprowl seemed surprised to see me. He was waiting in a private room. . . . He's looking rather badly these days. . . . We talked a few minutes——"

Pale, angry, every sense of modesty and reserve outraged, the girl faced him, small head erect:

"You went there to—to discuss *me* with *that* man!"

He was silent. She turned suddenly and tried to open the door, but he held it closed.

"I did it because I cared for you enough to do it," he said. "Don't you understand? Don't you suppose I know that kind of man?"

"It—it was not your business—" she faltered, twisting blindly at the door-knob. "Let me go—please——"

"I made it my business. . . . And that man understood that I was making it my business. And he won't attempt to annoy you again. . . . Can you forgive me?"

She turned on him excitedly, her eyes flashing with tears, but the impetuous words of protest died on her lips as her eyes encountered his.

"It was because I love you," he said. And, as he spoke, there was about the man a quiet dignity and distinction that silenced her—something of which she may have had vague glimpses at wide intervals in their acquaintances—something which at times she suspected might lie latent in unknown corners of his character. Now it suddenly confronted her; and she recognised it and stood before him without a word to say.

It mended matters a little when he smiled, and the familiar friend reappeared beside her; but she still felt strange and shy; and wondering, half fearfully, she let him lift her gloved hands and stand, holding them, looking into her eyes.

"You know what I am," he said. "I have nothing to say about myself. But I love you very dearly. . . . I loved before, once, and married. And she died. . . . After that I didn't behave very well—until I knew you.

. . . It is really in me to be a decent husband—if you can care for me. . . . And I don't think we're likely to starve——"

"I—it isn't that," she said, flushing scarlet.

"What?"

"What you *have*. . . . I could only care for—what you are."

"Can you do that?"

But her calm had vanished, and, head bent and averted, she was attempting to withdraw her hands—and might have freed herself entirely if it had not been for his arm around her.

This new and disconcerting phase of the case brought her so suddenly face to face with him that it frightened her; and he let her go, and followed her back to the empty gallery where she sank down at her desk, resting her arms on the covered type-machine, and buried her quivering face in them.

It was excusable. Such things don't usually happen to typewriters and stenographers although they have happened to barmaids.

When he had been talking eloquently and otherwise for a long time Jessie Vining lifted her pale, tear-stained face from her arms; and his lordship dropped rather gracefully on his knees beside her, and she looked down at him very solemnly and wistfully.

It was shockingly late when they closed the gallery that evening. And their mode of homeward progress was stranger still, for instead of a tram or of the taxi which Lord Dankmere occasionally prevailed upon her to accept, they drifted homeward on a pink cloud through the light-shot streets of Ascalon.

CHAPTER XVI

To the solitary and replete pike, lying motionless in shadow, no still-bait within reach is interesting. But the slightest movement in his vicinity of anything helpless instantly rivets his attention; any creature apparently in distress arouses him to direct and lightning action whether he be gorged or not—even, perhaps, while he is still gashed raw with the punishment for his last attempt.

So it was with Langly Sprowl. He had come into town, sullen, restless, still fretting with checked desire. Within him a dull rage burned; he was ready to injure, ready for anything to distract his mind which, however, had not given up for a moment the dogged determination to recover the ground he had lost with perhaps the only woman in the world he had ever really cared for.

Yet, he was the kind of man who does not know what real love is. That understanding had not been born in him, and he had not acquired it. He was totally incapable of anything except that fierce passion which is aroused by obstacles when in pursuit of whatever evinces a desire to escape.

It was that way with him when, by accident, he saw and recognised Jessie Vining one evening leaving the Dankmere Galleries. And Langly Sprowl never denied himself anything that seemed incapable of self-defence.

He stopped his car and got out and spoke to her,

very civilly, and with a sort of kindly frankness which he sometimes used with convincing effect. She refused the proffered car to take her to her destination, but could not very well avoid his escort; and their encounter ended by her accepting his explanations and his extended hand, perplexed, unwilling to misjudge him, but thankful when he departed.

After that he continued to meet her occasionally and walk home with her.

Then he sent his footman and the car for her; and drew Lord Dankmere out of the grab-bag, to his infinite annoyance. Worse, Dankmere had struck him with an impact so terrific that it had knocked him senseless across the table in a private dining-room of the Café Cammargue, where he presently woke up with a most amazing eye to find the terrified proprietor and staff playing Samaritan.

In various papers annoying paragraphs concerning him had begun to appear—hints of how matters stood between him and Mary Ledwith, ugly innuendo, veiled rumours of the breach between him and his aunt consequent upon his untenable position *vis-à-vis* Mrs. Ledwith.

Until Dankmere had inconvenienced his features he had walked downtown to his office every day, lank, long-legged, sleek head held erect, hatchet face pointed straight in front of him, his restless eyes encountering everybody's but seeing nobody unless directly saluted.

Now, his right eye rivalling a thunder-cloud in tints, he drove one of his racing cars as fast as he dared, swinging through Westchester or scurrying about Long Island. Occasionally he went aboard the *Yulan*, but a burning restlessness kept him moving; and at last he

returned to South Linden in a cold but deadly rage, determined to win back the chances which he supposed he had thrown away in the very moment of victory.

Strelsa Leeds had now taken up her abode in her quaint little house; he learned that immediately; and that evening he went over and came upon her moving about in the dusky garden, so intent on inspecting her flowers that he was within a pace of her before she turned her head and saw him.

"Strelsa," he said, "can we not be friends again? I ask no more than that."

Too surprised and annoyed to reply she merely gazed at him. And, because, for the first time in his life, perhaps, he really felt every word he uttered, he spoke now with a certain simplicity and self-control that sounded unusual to her ears—so noticeably unlike what she knew of him that it commanded her unwilling attention.

For his unpardonable brutality and violence he asked forgiveness, promising to serve her faithfully and in friendship for the privilege of attempting to win back her respect and regard. He asked only that.

He said that he scarcely knew what to do with his life without the hope of recovering her respect and esteem; he asked for a beggar's chance, begged for it with a candour and naïveté almost boyish—so directly to the point tended every instinct in him to recover through caution and patience what he had lost through carelessness and a violence which still astonished him.

The Bermuda lilies were in bloom and Strelsa stood near them, listening to him, touching the tall stalks absently at intervals. And while she listened she became more conscious still of the great change in herself—of

her altered attitude toward so much in life that once had seemed to her important. After he had ceased she still stood pensively among the lilies, gray eyes brooding. At length, looking up, she said very quietly:

"Why do you care for my friendship, Langly? I am not the kind of woman you think me—not even the kind I once thought myself. To me friendship is no light thing either to ask for or to give. It means more to me than it once did; and I give it very seldom, and sparingly, and to very, very few. But toward everybody I am gently disposed—because, I am much happier than I ever have been in all my life. . . . Is not my good will sufficient for any possible relation between you and me?"

"Then you are no longer angry with me?"

"No—no longer angry."

"Can we be friends again? Can you really forgive me, Strelsa?"

"Why—yes, I could do that. . . . But, Langly, what have you and I in common as a basis for friendship? What have we ever had in common? Except when we encounter each other by hazard, why should we ever meet at all?"

"You have not pardoned me, Strelsa," he said patiently.

"Does that really make any difference to you? It doesn't to me. It is only because I never think of you that it would be an effort to forgive you. I'll make that effort if you wish, but really, Langly, I never think about you at all."

"If that is true, let me be with you sometimes, Strelsa," he said in a low voice.

"Why?"

"Because I am wretchedly unhappy. And I care for you—more than you realise."

She said seriously: "You have no right to speak that way to me, Langly."

"Could you ever again give me the right to say I love you?"

A quick flush of displeasure touched her cheeks; he saw it in the dusk of the garden, and mistook it utterly:

"Strelsa—listen to me, dear! I have not slept since our quarrel. I must have been stark mad to say and do what I did. . . . Don't leave me! Don't go! I beg you to listen a moment——"

She had started to move away from him and his first forward step broke a blossom from its stalk where it hung white in the dusk.

"I ask you to go," she said under her breath. "There are people here—on the veranda——"

Every sense within him told him to go, pretending resignation. That was his policy. He had come here for martyrdom, cuirassed in patience. Every atom of common sense warned him to go.

But also every physical sense in him was now fully aroused—the silvery star-dusk, the scent of lilies, a slender woman within arm's reach—this woman who had once been so nearly his—who was still rightfully his!—these circumstances were arousing him once more to a temerity which his better senses warned him to subdue. Yet if he could only get nearer to her—if he could once get her into his arms—overwhelm her with the storm of passion rising so swiftly within him, almost choking him—so that his voice and limbs already trembled in its furious surge——

"Strelsa—I love you! For God's sake show me some

mercy!" he stammered. "I come to you half crazed by the solitude to which your anger has consigned me. I cannot endure it—I need you—I want you—I ask for your compassion——"

"Hush!" she pleaded, hastily retreating before him through the snowy banks of rockets—"I have asked you not to speak to me that way! I ask you to go—to go now!—because——"

"Will you listen to me! Will you wait a moment! I am only trying to tell you that I love you, dear——"

He almost caught her, but she sprang aside, frightened, still retreating before him.

"I cannot go until you listen to me!—" he said thickly, trampling through the flowers to intercept her. "You've got to listen!—do you hear?"

She had almost reached the terrace; the shadowy veranda opened widely beyond.

"There are people here! Don't you understand?" she said once more in a choking voice; but he only advanced, and she fell back before him to the very edge of the porch lattice.

"Now listen to me!" he said between his teeth. "I love you and I'll never give you up——"

Suddenly she turned on him, hands tightly clenched:

"Be silent!" she whispered fiercely. "I tell you what you say is indecent, revolting! If there were a man here he'd kill you! Do you understand?"

At the same instant his eyes became fixed on a figure in white which took shadowy shape on the dark veranda, rising and coming slowly forward.

Ghostlike as it was he knew it instantly, stood rooted in his tracks while Strelsa stole away from him through the star-lit gloom, farther, farther, slipping forever

from him now—he knew that as he stood there staring like a damned man upon that other dim shape in the darkness beyond.

It was his first glimpse of her since her return from Reno. And now, unbidden, memories half strangled were already in full resurrection, gasping in his ears of things that had been—of forgotten passion, of pleasure promised; and, because never tasted, it had been the true and only pleasure for such a man as he—the pleasure of anticipation. But the world had never, would never believe that. Only he, and the phantom there in the dusk before him, knew it to be true.

Slightly reeling he turned away in the darkness. In his haunted ears sounded a young wife's voice, promising, caressing; through and through him shot a thrill of the old excitement, the old desire, urging him again toward belated consummation.

And again the old impatience seized him, the old ruthlessness, the old anger at finding her weak in every way except one, the old contempt which had turned to sullen amazement when she wrote him that she had gone to Reno and that they must wait for their happiness until the courts decreed it legal.

Now as he swung along under the high stars he was thinking of these things. And he felt that he had not tried her enough, had not really exerted himself—that women who are fools require closer watching than clever ones; that he could have overcome her scruples with any real effort and saved her from giving him the slip and sowing a wind in Reno which already had become enough of a breeze to bother him.

With her, for a while, he might be able to distract his mind from this recent obsession tormenting him. To

overcome her would interest him; and he had no doubt it could be done—for she was a little fool—silly enough to slap the world in the face and brave public opinion at Reno. No—it was not necessary to marry such a woman. She might think so, but it wasn't.

He had behaved unwisely, too. Why should he not have gone to see her when she returned? By doing so, and acting cleverly, he could have avoided trouble with his aunt, and also these annoying newspaper paragraphs. Also he could have avoided the scene with Ledwith—and the aborted reconciliation just now with Strelsa, where he had stood staring at the apparition of Mary Ledwith as lost souls stand transfixed before the pallid shades of those whom they have destroyed.

At his lodge-gate a half-cowering dog fawned on him and he kicked it aside. The bruised creature fled, and Sprowl turned in at his gates and walked slowly up the cypress-bordered drive.

He thought it all out that night, studied it carefully. What he needed was distraction from the present torment. Mary Ledwith could give that to him. What a fool she had been ever to imagine that she could be anything more than his temporary mistress.

"The damned little idiot," he mused—"cutting away to Reno before I knew what she was up to—and involving us both in all that talk! What did she flatter herself I wanted, anyway. . . But I ought to have called on her at once; now it's going to be difficult."

Yet he sullenly welcomed the difficulty—hoped that she'd hold out. That was what he wanted, the excitement of it to take his mind from Strelsa—keep him interested and employed until the moment arrived once

more when he might venture to see her again. He was, by habit, a patient man. Only in the case of Strelsa Leeds had passion ever prematurely betrayed him; and, pacing his porch there in the darkness, he set his teeth and wondered at himself and cursed himself, unable to reconcile what he knew of himself with what he had done to the only woman he had ever wished to marry as a last resort.

For two weeks Sprowl kept to himself. Few men understood better than he what was the medicinal value of time. Only once had he dared ignore it.

So one evening, late in August, still dressed in knickerbockers and heather-spats, he walked from his lawn across country to make the first move in a new game with Mary Ledwith.

Interested, confident, already amused, and in far better spirits than he had been for many a day, he strode out across the fields, swinging his walking-stick, his restless eyes seeing everything and looking directly at nothing.

Which was a mistake on his part for once, because, crossing a pasture corner, his own bull, advancing silently from a clump of willows, nearly caught him; but Sprowl went over the fence and, turning, brought down his heavy stick across the brute's ringed nose; and the animal bellowed at him and tore up the sod and followed along inside the fence thundering his baffled fury as long as Sprowl remained in sight.

It was not all bad disposition. Sprowl, who cared nothing for animals, hated the bull, and, when nothing more attractive offered, was accustomed to come to the fence, irritate the animal, lure him within range, and

strike him. He had done it many times; and, some day, he meant to go into the pasture with a rifle, stand the animal's charge, and shoot him.

It was a calm, primrose-tinted sunset where trees and hills and a distant spire loomed golden-black against the yellow west. No trees had yet turned, although, here and there on wooded hills, single discoloured branches broke the green monotony.

No buckwheat had yet been cut, but above the ruddy fields of stalks the snow of the blossoms had become tarnished in promise of maturity—the first premonition of autumn except for a few harvest apples yellow amid green leaves.

He had started without any definite plan, a confident but patient opportunist; and as he approached the Ledwith property and finally sighted the chimneys of the house above the trees, something—some errant thought seemed to amuse him, for he smiled slightly. His smile was as rare as his laughter—and as brief; and there remained no trace of it as he swung up the last hill and stood there gazing ahead.

The sun had set. A delicate purple haze already dimmed distances; and the twilight which falls more swiftly as summer deepens into autumn was already stealing into every hollow and ravine, darkening the alders where the stream stole swampwards. A few laggard crows were still winging toward the woods; a few flocks of blackbirds passed overhead almost unseen against the sky. Somewhere some gardener had been burning leaves and refuse, and the odour made the dusk more autumn-like.

As he crossed the line separating his land from the Ledwith estate he nodded to the daughter of one of his

own gardeners who was passing with a collie; and then he turned to look again at the child whose slender grace and freshness interested him.

"Look out for that bull, Europa," he said, staring after her as she walked on.

She looked back at him, laughingly, and thanked him and went on quite happily, the collie plodding at her heels. Recently Sprowl had been very pleasant to her.

When she was out of sight he started forward, climbed the fence into the road, followed it to the driveway, and followed that among the elms and Norway firs to the porch.

It was so dark here among the trees that only the lighted transom guided him up the steps.

To the maid who came to the door he said coolly: "Say to Mrs. Ledwith that Mr. Sprowl wishes to see her for a moment on a very important matter."

"Mrs. Ledwith is not at home, sir."

"What?"

"Mrs. Ledwith is not at home."

"Where is she; out?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Where?"

"I don't know, sir——"

"Yes, you do. Mrs. Ledwith is at home but has given you instructions concerning me. Isn't that so?"

The maid, crimson and embarrassed, made no answer, and he walked past her into the drawing-room.

"Light up here," he said.

"Please, sir——"

"Do as I tell you, my good girl. Here—where's that button?—there!—" as the pretty room sprang

into light—"Now never mind your instructions but go and say to Mrs. Ledwith that I *must* see her."

He calmly unfolded a flat packet of fresh bank-notes, selected one, changed it on reflection for another of higher denomination, and handed it to her. The girl hesitated, still irresolute until he lifted his narrow head and stared at her. Then she went away hurriedly.

When she returned to say that Mrs. Ledwith was not at home to Mr. Sprowl he shrugged and bade her inform her mistress that their meeting was not a matter of choice but of necessity, and that he would remain where he was until she received him.

Again the maid went away, evidently frightened, and Sprowl lighted a cigarette and began to saunter about. When he had examined everything in the room he strolled into the farther room. It was unlighted and suited him to sit in; and he installed himself in a comfortable chair and, throwing his cigarette into the fireplace, lighted a cigar.

This was a game he understood—a waiting game. The game was traditional with his forefathers; every one of them had played it; their endless patience had made a fortune to which each in turn had added before he died. Patience and courage—courage of the sort known as personal bravery—had distinguished all his race. He himself had inherited patience, and had used it wisely except in that one inexplicable case!—and personal courage in him had never been lacking, nor had what often accompanies it, coolness, obstinacy, and effrontery.

He had decided to wait until his cigar had been leisurely finished. Then, other measures—perhaps walking upstairs, unannounced, perhaps an unresentful with-

drawal, a note by messenger, and another attempt to see her to-morrow—he did not yet know—had arrived at no conclusion—but would make up his mind when he finished his cigar and then do whatever caution dictated.

Once a servant came to the door to look around for him, and when she discovered him in the half-light of the music-room she departed hastily for regions above. This amused Sprowl.

As he lounged there, thoroughly comfortable, he could hear an occasional stir in distant regions of the house, servants moving perhaps, a door opened or closed, faint creaks from the stairs. Once the distant sounds indicated that somebody was using a telephone; once, as he neared the end of his cigar, a gray cat stole in, caught sight of him, halted, her startled eyes fixed on him, then turned and scuttled out into the hall.

Finally he rose, flicked his cigar ashes into the fireplace, stretched his powerful frame, yawned, and glanced at his watch.

And at the same instant somebody entered the front door with a latch-key.

Sprowl stood perfectly still, interested, waiting: and two men, bare-headed and in evening dress, came swiftly but silently into the drawing-room. One was Quarren, the other Chester Ledwith. Quarren took hold of Ledwith's arm and tried to draw him out of the room. Then Ledwith caught sight of Sprowl and started toward him, but Quarren again seized his companion by the shoulder and dragged him back.

"I tell you to keep quiet," he said in a low voice—"Keep out of this!—go out of the house!"

"I can't, Quarren! I——"

"You promised not to come in until that man had left——"

"I know it. I meant to—but, good God! Quarren! I can't stand there——"

He was struggling toward Sprowl and Quarren was trying to push him back into the hall.

"You said that you had given up any idea of personal vengeance!" he panted. "Let me deal with him quietly——"

"I didn't know what I was saying," retorted Ledwith, straining away from the man who held him, his eyes fixed on Sprowl. "I tell you I can't remain quiet and see that blackguard in this house——"

"But he's going I tell you! He's going without a row—without any noise. Can't you let me manage it——"

He could not drag Ledwith to the door, so he forced him into a chair and stood guard, glancing back across his shoulder at Sprowl.

"You'd better go," he said in a low but perfectly distinct voice.

Sprowl, still holding his cigar, sauntered forward into the drawing-room.

"I suppose you are armed," he said contemptuously. "If you threaten me I'll take away your guns and slap both your faces—ask the other pup how it feels, Quarren."

Ledwith struggled to rise but Quarren had him fast.

"Get out of here, Sprowl," he said. "You'll have a bad time of it if he gets away from me."

Sprowl stared, hands in his pockets, puffing his cigar.

"I've a notion to kick you both out," he drawled.

"It would be a mistake," panted Quarren. "Can't you go while there's time, Sprowl! I tell you he'll kill you in this room if you don't."

"I won't—*kill* him!—Let go of me, Quarren," gasped Ledwith. "I—I won't do murder; I've promised you that—for *her* sake——"

"Let him loose, Quarren," said Sprowl.

He waited for a full minute, watching the struggling men in silent contempt. Then with a shrug he went out into the hall, leisurely put on his hat, picked up his stick, opened the door, and sauntered out into the darkness.

"Now," breathed Quarren fiercely, "you play the man or I'm through with you! He's gone and he won't come back—I'll see to that! And it's up to you to show what you're made of!"

Ledwith, freed, stood white and breathing hard for a few moments. Then a dull flush suffused his thin face; he looked down, stood with hanging head, until Quarren laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It's up to you, Ledwith," he said quietly. "I don't blame you for losing your head a moment, but if you mean what you said, I should say that this is your chance. . . . And if I were you I'd simply go upstairs and speak to her. . . . She's been through hell. . . . She's in it still. But *you're* out; and you can stay out if you choose. There's no need to wallow if you don't want to. You're not in very good shape yet, but you're a man. And now, if you do care for her, I really believe it's up to you. . . . Will you go upstairs?"

Ledwith turned and went out into the familiar hall. Then, as though dazed, resting one thin hand on the rail, he mounted the stairway, head hanging, feeling his

"'Let him loose, Quarren,' said Sprowl."

way blindly back toward all that life had ever held for him, but which he had been too weak to keep or even to defend.

Quarren waited for a while; Ledwith did not return. After a few minutes an excited maid came down, stared at him, then, reassured, opened the door for him with a smile. And he went out into the starlight.

He had been walking for only a few moments when he overtook Sprowl sauntering down a lane; and the latter glanced around and, recognising him, halted.

"Where's the other hero?" he asked.

"Probably discussing you with the woman he is likely to remarry."

Sprowl shrugged:

"That's what that kind of a man is made for—to marry what others don't have to marry."

"You lie," said Quarren quietly.

Sprowl stared at him: then the long-pent fury overwhelmed his common sense again, and again it was in regard to the woman he had lost by his violence.

"You know," he said, measuring his words, "that you're the same kind of a man, too. And some day, if you're good, you can marry what I don't have to marry——"

He reeled under Quarren's blow, then struck at him blindly with his walking-stick, leaping at him savagely but recoiling, dizzy, half senseless under another blow so terrific that it almost nauseated him.

He stood for a time, supporting himself against a tree; then as his wits returned he lifted his bruised face and stared murderously about him. Quarren was walking toward Witch-Hollow—half way there already and out of earshot as well as sight.

Against the stars something moved on a near hilltop, and Sprowl reeled forward in pursuit, breaking into a heavy and steady run as the thing disappeared in the darkness. But he had seen it move, just beyond that fence, and he seized the top rail and got over and ran forward in the darkness, clutching his stick and calling to Quarren by name.

Where had he gone? He halted to listen, peering around with swollen eyes. Blood dripped from his lips and cheek; he passed his hand over them, glaring, listening. Suddenly he heard a dull sound close behind him in the night; whirled to confront what was coming with an unseen rush, thundering down on him, shaking the very ground.

He made no outcry; there was no escape, nothing to do but to strike; and he struck with every atom of his strength; and went crashing down into darkness. And over his battered body bellowed and raged the bull.

Even the men who found them there in the morning could scarcely drive away the half-crazed brute. And the little daughter of the gardener, who had discovered what was there in the pasture, cowered in the fence corner, crying her heart out for her father's dead master who had spoken kindly to her since she had grown up and who had even taken her into his arms and kissed her the day before when she had brought him a rare orchid from the greenhouse.

Every newspaper in America gave up the right-hand columns to huge headlines and an account of the tragedy at South Linden. Every paper in the world

chronicled it. There were few richer men in the world than Langly Sprowl. The tragedy moved everybody in various ways; stocks, however, did not move either way to the surprise of everybody. On second thoughts, however, the world realised that his wealth had been too solidly invested to cause a flurry. Besides he had a younger brother financing something or other for the Emperor of China. Now he would return. The great race would not become extinct.

That night Quarren went back to the Wycherlys and found Molly waiting for him in the library.

"What on earth did Mary Ledwith want of Jim this evening?" she asked.

"Sprowl was in the house."

"What!"

"That's why the poor child telephoned. She was probably afraid of him, and wanted Jim there."

Molly's teeth clicked:

"Jim would have half-killed him. It's probably a good thing he was in town. What did you do?"

"Nothing. Sprowl went all right."

"What did Mary say to you?"

"I didn't see her."

"You didn't *see* her?"

"No."

Molly's eyes grew rounder:

"Where is Chester Ledwith? He didn't go with you into the house, did he?"

"Yes, he did."

"But where is he? You—you don't mean to say——"

"Yes, I do. He went upstairs and didn't re-

turn. . . . So I waited for a while and then—came back."

They sat silent for a while, then Molly lifted her eyes to his and they were brimming with curiosity.

"If they become reconciled," she said, "how are people going to take it, Rix?"

"Characteristically I suppose."

"You mean that some will be nasty about it?"

"Some."

"But then——"

"Oh, Molly, Molly," he said, smiling, "there are more important things than what a few people are likely to think or say. The girl made a fool of herself, and the man weakened and nearly went to pieces. He's found himself again; he's disposed to help her find herself. It was only one of those messes that the papers report every day. Few get out of such pickles, but I believe these two are going to. . . . And somehow, do you know—from something Sprowl said to-night, I don't believe that she went the entire limit—took the last ditch."

Molly reddened: "Why?"

"Because, although they do it in popular fiction, men like Sprowl never really boast of their successes. His sort keep silent—when there's anything to conceal."

"Did he boast?"

"He did. I was sure he was lying, and I—" he shrugged.

"Told him so?"

"Well, something of that sort."

"I believe he was lying, too. . . . It was just like that romantic little fool to run off to Reno after nothing worse than the imprudence of infatuation. I've

known her a long while, Rix. She's too shallow for real passion, too selfish to indulge it anyway. His name and fortune did the business for her—little idiot. Really she annoys me."

Quarren smiled: "Her late husband seems to like her. Fools feminine have made many a man happy. You'll be nice to her I'm sure."

"Of course. . . . Everybody will on Mrs. Sprowl's account."

Quarren laughed again, then:

"Meanwhile this Ledwith business has prevented my talking to Strelsa over the telephone," he said.

"Oh, Rix! You *said* you were going to surprise her in the morning!"

"But I want to see her, Molly. I don't want to wait——"

"It's after ten and Strelsa has probably retired. She's a perfect farmer, I tell you—yawns horribly every evening at nine. Why, I can't keep her awake long enough to play a hand at Chinese Khan! Be reasonable, Rix. You had planned to surprise her in the morning. . . . And—I'm lonely without Jim. . . . Besides, if you are clever enough to burst upon Strelsa's view in the morning when the day is young and all before her, and when she's looking her very best, nobody can tell what might happen. . . . And I'll whisper in your ear that the child has really missed you. . . . But don't be in a hurry with her, will you, Rix?"

"No," he said absently.

Molly picked up her knitting.

"If Chester Ledwith doesn't return by twelve I'm going to have the house locked," she said, stifling a yawn.

At twelve o'clock the house was accordingly locked for the night.

"It's enough to compromise her," said Molly, crossly. "What a pair of fools they are."

CHAPTER XVII

Strelsa, a pink apron pinned about her, a trowel in her gloved hand, stood superintending the transplanting of some purple asters which not very difficult exploit was being attempted by a local yokel acting as her "hired man."

The garden, a big one with a wall fronting the road, ran back all the way to the terrace in the rear of the house beyond which stretched the western veranda.

And it was out on this veranda that Quarren stepped in the wake of Strelsa's maid, and from there he caught his first view of Strelsa's garden, and of Strelsa herself, fully armed and caparisoned for the perennial fray with old Dame Nature.

"You need not go down there to announce me," he said; "I'll speak to Mrs. Leeds myself."

But before he could move, Strelsa, happening to turn around, saw him on the veranda, gazed at him incredulously for a moment, then brandished her trowel with a clear, distant cry of greeting, and came toward him, laughing in her excitement and surprise. They met midway, and she whipped off her glove and gave him her hand in a firm, cool clasp.

"Why the dickens didn't you wire!" she said. "You're a fraud, Rix! I might easily have been away!— You might have missed me—we might have

missed each other. . . . Is *that* all you care about seeing me?—after all these weeks!"

"I wanted to surprise you," he explained feebly.

"Well, you didn't! That is—not much. I'd been thinking of you—and I glanced up and saw you. You're stopping at Molly's I suppose."

"Yes."

"When did you arrive?"

"L-last night," he admitted.

"What! And didn't call me up! I refuse to believe it of you!"

She really seemed indignant, and he followed her into the pretty house where presently she became slightly mollified by his exuberant admiration of the place.

"Are you in earnest?" she said. "Do you really think it so pretty? If you do I'll take you upstairs and show you my room, and the three beautiful spick and span guest rooms. But *you'll* never occupy one!" she added, still wrathful at his apparent neglect of her. "I don't want anybody here who isn't perfectly devoted to me. And it's very plain that you are not."

He mildly insisted that he was but she denied it, hotly.

"And I shall *never* get over it," she added. "But you may come upstairs and see what you have missed."

They went over the renovated house thoroughly; she, secretly enchanted at his admiration and praise of everything, pointed out any object that seemed to have escaped his attention merely to hear him approve it. Finally she relented.

"You *are* satisfactory," she said as they returned to the front veranda and seated themselves. "And really, Rix, I'm so terribly glad to see you that I for-

"'I wanted to surprise

you,' he explained feebly."

give your neglect. . . . Are you well? You don't look very well," she added earnestly. "Why are you so white?"

"I'm in fine shape, thank you."

"I didn't mean your figure," she laughed—"Oh, that *was* a common kind of a joke, wasn't it? But I'm only a farmer, Rix. You must expect the ruder and simpler forms of speech from a lady of the woodshed! . . . Why are you so pale?"

"Do I seem particularly underdone?"

"That's horrid, too. Are you and I going to degenerate just because you work for a living? You *are* unusually thin, anyway; and the New York pallor is very noticeable. Will you stay and get sunburnt?"

"I *could* stay a few days."

"How many?"

"How many do you want me? Two whole days, Strelsa?"

She laughed at him, then looked at him a trifle shyly, but laughed again as she answered:

"I want you to stay always, of course. Don't pretend that you don't know it, because you are perfectly aware that I never tire of you. But if you can stay only two days don't let us waste any time——"

"We're not wasting it here together, are we?"

"Don't you want to walk? I haven't a horse yet, except for agricultural purposes. I'll rinse my hands and take off this apron—" She stood unpinning and untying it, her gray eyes never leaving him in their unabashed delight in him.

Then she disappeared for a few minutes only to reappear wearing a pair of stout little shoes and carry-

ing a walking-stick which she said she used in rough country.

And first they visited her garden where all the old-fashioned autumn flowers were in riotous bloom—scarlet sage, rockets, thickets of gladiolus, heavy borders of asters, marigolds, and coreopsis; and here she gave a few verbal directions to the yokel who gaped toothlessly in reply.

After that, side by side, they swung off together across the hill, she, lithe and slender, setting the springy pace and twirling her walking-stick, he, less accustomed to the open and more so to the smooth hot streets of the city, slackening pace first.

She chided and derided him and bantered him scornfully, then with sudden sweet concern halted, reproaching herself for setting too hot a pace for a city-worn and work-worn man.

But the cool shadows of the woods were near, and she made him rest on the little footbridge—the same bridge where he had encountered Ledwith for the first time in years. He recognised the spot.

After they had seated themselves and Strelsa, resting on the back of the bridge seat, was contentedly dabbling in the stream with her cane, Quarren said, slowly:

"Shall I tell you why I did not disturb you last night, Strelsa?"

"You can't excuse it——"

"You shall be judge and jury. It's rather a long story, though——"

"I am listening."

"Then, it has to do with Ledwith. He's not very well but he's better than he was. You see he wanted to take a course of treatment to regain his health, and

there seemed to be nobody else, so—I offered to see him through."

"That's like you, Rix," she said, looking at him.

"Oh, it wasn't anything—I had nothing to do——"

"That's like you, too. Did you pull him through?"

"He pulled himself through. . . . It was strenuous for two or three days—and hot as the devil in that sanitarium." . . . He laughed. "We both were wrecks when we came out two weeks later—oh, a bit groggy, that's really all. . . . And he had no place to go—and seemed to be inclined to keep hold of my sleeve—so I telephoned Molly. And she said to bring him up. That was nice of her, wasn't it?"

"Everybody is wonderful except you," she said.

"Nonsense," he said, "it wasn't I who went through a modified hell. He's got a lot of backbone, Ledwith. . . . And so we came up last night. . . . And—now here's the interesting part, Strelsa! We strolled over to call on Mrs. Ledwith——"

"What!"

"Certainly. I myself didn't see her but—" he laughed—"she seemed to be at home to her ex-husband."

"Rix!"

"It's a fact. He went back there for breakfast this morning after he'd changed his clothes."

"After—*what?*"

"Yes. It seems that they started out in a canoe about midnight and he didn't turn up at Witch-Hollow until just before breakfast—and then he only stayed long enough to change to boating flannels. . . . You should see him; he's twenty years younger. . . . I fancy they'll get along together in future."

"Oh, Rix!" she said, "that was darling of you! You *are* wonderful even if you don't seem to know it! . . . And to think—to *think* that Mary Ledwith is going to be happy again! . . . Oh, you don't know how it has been with her—the silly, unhappy little thing!

"Why, after Mrs. Sprowl left, the girl went all to pieces. Molly and I did what we could—but Molly isn't strong and Mrs. Ledwith was at my house almost all the time— Oh, it was quite dreadful, and I'm sure she was really losing her senses—because—I think I'll tell you—I tell you everything—" She hesitated, and then, lowering her voice:

"She had come to see me, and she was lying on the lounge in my dressing-room, crying; and I was doing my hair. And first I knew she sobbed out that she had killed her husband and wanted to die, and she caught up that pistol that Sir Charles gave me at the Bazaar last winter—it looked like a real one—and the next thing I knew she had fired a charge of Japanese perfume at her temple, and it was all over her face and hair! . . . Don't laugh, Rix; she thought she had killed herself, and I had a horrid, messy time of it reviving her."

"You poor child," he exclaimed trying not to laugh—"she had no brains to blow out anyway. . . . That's a low thing to say. Ledwith likes her. . . . I really believe she's been scared into life-long good behaviour."

"She wasn't—really—horrid," said Strelsa in a low voice. "She told me so."

"I don't doubt it," he said. "But one way or the other you might as well reproach a humming-bird for its morals. There are such people."

After a short silence she said:

"Tell me about people in town."

"There are few there. Besides," he added smilingly, "I don't see much of your sort of people."

"*My* sort?" she repeated, lifting her gray eyes. "Am I not your sort, Rix?"

"Are you? You should see me in my overalls and shirt-sleeves, stained with solvents and varnish, sticky with glue and reeking turpentine, ironing out a canvas with a warm flat-iron! . . . Am I your kind, Strelsa?"

"Yes. . . . Am I *your* kind?"

"You always were. You know that."

"Yes, I do know it, now." She sat very still, hands folded, considering him with gray and speculative eyes.

"From the very beginning," she said, "you have never once disappointed me."

"What!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Never," she repeated.

"Why—why, I got in wrong the very first time!" he said.

"You mean that wager we made?"

"Yes."

"But you behaved like a good sportsman."

"Well, I wasn't exactly a bounder. But you were annoyed."

She smiled: "Was I?"

"You seemed to be."

"Yet I sat in a corner behind some palms with you until daylight."

They looked at each other and laughed over the reminiscence. Then he said:

"I *did* disappoint you when you found out what sort of a man I was."

"No, you didn't."

"I proved it, too," he said under his breath.

Her lips were set firmly, almost primly, but she blushed.

"You meant to be nice to me," she said. "You meant to do me honour."

"The honour of offering you such a man as I was," he said with smiling bitterness.

"Rix! *I* was the fool—the silly little prig! I have blushed and blushed to remember how I behaved; how I snubbed you and—good heavens!—even lectured and admonished you!—How I ran away from you with all the self-possession and *savoir-faire* of a country schoolgirl! What on earth you thought of me in those days I dread to surmise——"

"But Strelsa, what was there to do except what you did?"

"If I'd known anything I could have thanked you for caring that way for me and dismissed you as a friend instead of fleeing as though you had affronted me——"

"I *did* affront you."

"You didn't intend to. . . . It would have been easy enough to tell you that I liked you—but not that way. . . . And all those miserable, lonely, unhappy months could have been spared me——"

"Were *you* unhappy?"

"Didn't you know it?"

"I never dreamed you were."

"Well, I was—thinking of what I had done to you. . . . And all those men bothering me every moment, and everybody at me to marry everybody else—and all I

wanted was to be friends with *you!* . . . I wasn't sure of what I wanted from the very beginning, of course, but I knew it as soon as I saw you at the Bazaar again. . . . I was *so* lonely, Rix——"

She looked up out of clear, fearless eyes; he leaned forward and took her hands in his.

"I know what you want," he said quietly. "You want my friendship and you have it—every atom of it, Strelsa. I will never overstep the borders again; I understand you thoroughly. . . . You know what you have done for me—what I was when you came into my life. My gratitude is a living thing. Through you, because of you, the whole unknown world—all of real life—has opened before me. You did it for me, Strelsa."

"You did it for yourself and for me," she said in a low voice. "What are you trying to tell me, Rix? That *I* did this for *you?* When it is you—it was you from the first—it has always been you who led, who awakened first, who showed courage and common sense and patience and the cheerful wisdom which—which saved me——"

The emotion in her voice stirred him thrillingly; her hands lay confidently in his; her gray eyes met his so sweetly, so honestly, that hope awoke for a moment.

"Strelsa," he said, "however it was with us—however it is now, I think that together we amount to more than we ever could have amounted to apart."

"I know it," she said fervently. "I was nothing until I began to comprehend you."

"What was I before you awoke me?"

"A man neglecting his nobler self. . . . But it could not have lasted; your real self could not have long

endured that harlequinade we once thought was real life. . . . I'm glad if you think that I—something about me—aroused you. . . . But if I had not, somebody or some circumstance would have very soon served the same purpose."

"Do you think so?" he said, stooping to kiss her hands. She looked at him while he did so, confused by the quick pleasure of the contact, then schooled herself to endure it, setting her lips in a grave, firm line.

And it was a most serious face he lifted his eyes to as she quietly withdrew her fingers from his.

"You always played the courtier to perfection," she said, trying to speak lightly. "Tell me about that accomplished and noble peer, Lord Dankmere. Are you still inclined to like him?"

He accepted her light and careless change of tone instantly, and spoke laughingly of Dankmere:

"He's really a mighty nice fellow, Strelsa. Anyway, I like him. And *what* do you think his lordship has been and gone and done?"

"Has he become a Russian dancer, Rix?"

"No, bless his heart! He's fallen head over ears in love and is engaged and is going to marry!"

"Who?"

"Our stenographer!"

"Rix!"

"Certainly. . . . She's pretty and sweet and good and *most* worthy; and she's as crazy about Dankmere as he is about her. . . . Really, Strelsa, she's a charming young girl, and she'll make as pretty a countess as any of the Dankmeres have married in many a generation."

Strelsa's lip curled: "I don't doubt that. They

were always a horrid cock-fighting, prize-fighting, dissolute lot, weren't they?"

"Something like that. But the present Dankmere is a good sort—really he is, Strelsa. And as for Jessie Vining, she's sweet. You'll be nice to them, won't you?"

She said: "I'd be nice to them anyway. But now that you ask me to I'll be whatever you wish."

"You *are* a corker," he said almost tenderly; but with a slight smile she kept her hands out of his reach.

"We mustn't degenerate into sentimentalism just because we're glad to see each other," she said so calmly that he did not notice the tremor in her voice. "And by the way, how is Mr. Westguard?"

They both laughed.

"Speaking of sentiment," said Quarren, "Karl now exudes it daily. He and Bleecker De Groot and Mrs. Caldera—to Lester's rage—have started a weekly paper called *Brotherhood*, consisting of pabulum for the horny-handed.

"I couldn't do anything with Karl. Just look at him! He's really a good story-teller if he chooses. He could write jolly-good novels if he would. But the spectacle of De Groot weeping over a Bowery audience has finished him; and he's hard at work on a volume called 'The World's Woe,' and means to publish it himself because no publisher will take it."

"Poor Karl," she said, smiling.

"No," said Quarren, "that's the worst of it. His aunt has settled a million on him. . . . I tell you, Strelsa, the rich convert has less honour among the poor than the dingiest little 'dip' among the gorgeous corsairs of Wall Street.

"I don't know how it happens, but Christ was never yet successfully preached from Fifth Avenue, and the millionaire whose heart bleeds for the poor needs a sterner surgeon than a complacent conscience to really stop the hemorrhage."

"Rich men do good, Rix," she said thoughtfully.

"But not by teaching or practising the thrift of celestial insurance—not by admonition to orthodoxy and exhortation to worship a Creator who sees to it that no two people are created equal. There is only one thing the rich can give to the poor for Christ's sake; and even that will always be taken with suspicion and distrust. No; there are only two ways to live: one is the life of self-discipline; the other is to actually imitate the militant Son of Man whose faith we pretend to profess—but whose life-history we merely parody, turning His crusade into a grotesque carnival. I know of no third course consistent."

"To lead an upright life within bounds where your lines have fallen, or to strip and go forth militant," she mused. "There is no third course, as you say. . . . Do you know, Rix, that I have become a wonderfully happy sort of person?"

"So have I," he said, laughingly.

"It's just because we have something to do, isn't it?"

"That—and the leisure which the idle never have. It seems like a paradox, doesn't it?—to say that the idle never have any time to themselves."

"I know what you mean. I expect to work rather hard the rest of my life," she said seriously, "and yet I can foresee lots and lots of most delicious leisure awaiting me."

"Do you foresee anything else, pretty prophetess?"

"What else do you mean?"

"Well, for example, you will be alone here all winter."

"Do you mean loneliness?" she asked, smiling. "I don't expect to suffer from that. Molly will be here all winter and—you will write to me—" she turned to him—"won't you, Rix?"

"Certainly. Besides I'm coming up to see you every week."

"Every week!" she repeated, taken a little aback but smiling her sweet, confused smile. "Do you realise what you are so gaily engaging to do?"

"Perfectly. I'm going to build up here."

"What!"

"Of course."

"A—a house?"

He looked at her, hesitated, then looking away:

"Either a house or—an addition."

"An *addition?*"

"If you'll let me, Strelsa—some day."

She understood him then. The painful colour stole into her cheeks, faintly burning, and she closed her eyes for a moment to endure it, sitting silent, motionless, her little sun-tanned hands tightly clasped on her knees.

Then, unclosing her eyes she looked at him, delicate lips tightening.

"I thought our relations were to remain on a higher plane," she said steadily.

"Our relations are to remain what you desire them to be, dear."

"I desire them to be what they are—*always.*"

"Then that is my wish also," he said with a smile so genuine and gay that, a little confused by his acquiescence, her own response was slow. But presently her smile dawned, a little tremulous and uncertain, and her gray eyes remained wistful though the lips curled deliciously.

"I would do anything in the world for you, Rix, except—that," she said in a low voice.

"I know you would, you dear girl."

"Don't you really believe it?"

"Of course I do!"

"But—I *can't* do that—*ever*. It would—would spoil you for me. . . . What in the world would I do if you were spoiled for me, Rix? I haven't anybody else. . . . What would I do here—all alone? I couldn't stay—I wouldn't know what to do—where to go in the world. . . . It would be lonely—lonely——".

She bent her head, and remained so, gray eyes fixed on her clasped fingers. For a long while she sat bowed over, thinking; once or twice she lifted her eyes to look at him, but her gaze always became confused and remote; and he did not offer to break the silence.

At last she looked up with a movement of decision, her face clearing.

"You understand, don't you, Rix?" she said, rising.

He nodded, rising also; and they descended the steps together and walked slowly away toward Witch-Hollow.

From the hill-top they noticed one of Sprowl's farm-waggons slowly entering the drive, followed on foot by several men and a little girl. Her blond hair and apron

fluttered in the breeze. She was too far away for them to see that she was weeping.

"I wonder what they've got in that waggon?" said Quarren, curiously.

Strelsa's gaze became indifferent, then passed on and rested on the blue range of hills beyond.

"Isn't it wonderful about Chrysos," she said.

"The quaint little thing," he said almost tenderly. "She told Molly what happened—how she sat down under a fence to tie wild strawberries for Sir Charles, and how, all at once, she realised what his going out of her life meant to her—and how the tears choked her to silence until she suddenly found herself in his arms. . . . Can you see it as it happened, Strelsa?—as pretty a pastoral as ever the older poets—" He broke off abruptly, and she looked up, but he was still smiling as though the scene of another man's happiness, so lightly evoked, were a visualisation of his own. And again her gray eyes grew wistful as though shyly pleading for his indulgence and silently asking his pardon for all that she could never be to him or to any man.

So they came across fields and down through fragrant lanes to Witch-Hollow, where the fat setter gambolled ponderously around them with fat barkings and waggings, and where Molly, sewing on the porch, smoothed the frail and tiny garment over her knee and raised her pretty head to survey them with a smiling intelligence that made Strelsa blush.

"It *isn't* so!" she found an opportunity to whisper into Molly's ear. "If you look at us that way you'll simply make him miserable and break my heart."

Molly glanced after Quarren who had wandered indoors to find a cigarette in the smoking-room.

"If you don't marry that delectable young man," she said, "I'll take a stick and beat you, Strelsa."

"I don't want to—I don't *want* to!" protested the girl, getting possession of Molly's hands and covering them with caresses. And, resting her soft lips on Molly's fingers, she looked at her; and the young matron saw tears glimmering under the soft, dark lashes.

"I *can't* love him—that way," whispered the girl. "I would if I could. . . . I couldn't care for him more than I do. . . . And—and it terrifies me to think of losing him."

"Losing him?"

"Yes—by doing what you—what he—wishes."

"You think you'll lose him if you marry him?"

"I—yes. It would spoil him for me—spoil everything for me in the world——"

"Well, you listen to me," said Molly, exasperated. "When he has stood a certain amount of this silliness from you he'll really and actually turn into the sexless comrade you think you want. But he'll go elsewhere for a mate. There are plenty suitable in the world. If you'd never been born there would have been another for him. If you passed out of his life there would some day be another.

"Will we women never learn the truth?—that at best we are incidental to man, but that, when we love, man is the whole bally thing to us?

"Let him escape and you'll see, Strelsa. You'll get, perhaps, what you're asking for now, but he'll get what he is asking for, too—if not from you, from some girl of whom you and I and he perhaps have never heard.

"But she exists; don't worry. And any man worth his title is certain to encounter her sooner or later."

The girl, flushed, dumb, watched her out of wide gray eyes in which the unshed tears had dried. The pretty matron slowly shook her head:

"Because you once bit into tainted fruit you laid the axe to the entire orchard. What nonsense! Rottenness is the exception; soundness the rule. But you concluded that the hazard of bad fortune—that the unhappy chance of your first and only experience—was not an exception but the universal rule. . . . Very well; think it! He'll get over it some time, but you never will, Strelsa. You'll remember it all your life.

"For I tell you that we women who go to our graves without having missed a single pang—we who die having known happiness and its shadow which is sorrow—the happiness and sorrow which come through love of man alone—die as we should die, in deep content of destiny fulfilled—which is the only peace beyond all understanding."

The girl lowered her head and, resting her cheek on Molly's shoulder, looked down at the baby garment on her knees.

"That also?" she whispered.

"Yes. . . . Unless we pass that way, also, we can never die content. . . . But until a month ago I did not know it. . . . Strelsa—Strelsa! Are you never going to know what love can be?"

The girl rose slowly, flushing and whitening by turns, and stood a moment, her hands covering her eyes.

And standing so:

"Do you think he will go away—from me—some day?"

"Yes; he will go—unless——"

"Must it be—that way?"

"It will be that way, Strelsa."

"I had never thought of that."

"Think of it as the truth. It will be so unless you love him in his own fashion—and for his own sake. Try—if you care for him enough to try. . . . And if you do, you will love him for your own sake, too."

"I—I had thought of—of giving myself—for his sake—because he wishes it. . . . I don't believe I'll be—much afraid—of him. Do you?"

Molly's wise sweet eyes sparkled with silent laughter. Then without another glance at the tall, young girl before her she picked up her sewing, drew the needle from the hem, and smoothed out the lace embroidery on her knees.

After a while she said:

"Jim's returning on the noon train. Will you and Rix be here to luncheon?"

"I don't know."

"Well, ask him; I have my orders to give if you'll stay."

Strelsa walked into the house; Quarren, still hunting about for a cigarette, looked up as she entered the smoking-room.

"Where the dickens does Jim keep his cigarettes?" he asked. "Do you know, Strelsa?"

"You poor boy!" she exclaimed laughingly, "have you been searching all this time? The wonder is that you haven't perished. Why didn't you ask me for one when we were at—our house?"

"*Your* house?" he corrected, smiling.

Her gray eyes met his with a frightened sort of courage.

"*Our house*—if you wish—" But her lips had be-

gun to tremble and she could not control them or force from them another word for all her courage.

He came over to where she stood, one slim hand resting against the wall; and she looked back bravely into his keen eyes—the clear, direct, questioning eyes of a boy.

"I—I will—marry you," she said.

A swift flush touched his face to the temples.

"Don't you—want me?" she said, tremulously.

"If you love me, Strelsa."

"Isn't it enough—that you—love——"

"No, dear."

She lost her colour.

"Rix! Don't you want me?" she faltered.

"Not unless you want me, Strelsa."

She drew a long unsteady breath. Suddenly the tears sprang to her eyes, and she held out both hands to him, blindly.

"I—do love you," she whispered. . . . "I'll give what you give. . . . Only you must teach me—not to be—afraid."

Her cheek lay close to his shoulder; his arms drew her nearer. And, after he had waited a long while, her gray eyes, which had been watching his face, slowly closed, and she lifted her lips toward his.

THE END

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